



“Everywhere is Warmer than the house”: ‘Traumaculture’ in Laura Wade’s *Colder Than Here*

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary British theatre is a crucial avenue for staging trauma as theatre provides both the potential of emotional identification and critical perspective. By making use of the unique possibilities of embodied performance, theatre allows for a safe space in which traumatic suffering can be reconfigured. Drawing on the notion of Roger Luckhurst’s ‘traumaculture,’ this paper interrogates the extent to which contemporary British playwright Laura Wade’s one-act play, *Colder Than Here* (2005), situates current traumatic experiences within social and cultural contexts. This paper deals with terminal disease increases, familial dysfunction, and ecological degradation as traumatic experiences that permeate daily existence. Therefore, by bringing into the spotlight the contemporary definition of trauma and traumaculture, this paper aims at exploring how *Colder Than Here* reflects multifaceted engagements with traumatic cultural experiences onstage with a focus on a middle-class English family.

Keywords: Trauma, Traumaculture, Trauma theory, *Colder Than Here*, Laura Wade



Introduction

In contemporary culture, the term trauma has achieved a remarkable amount of coverage. The significance of traumatic experiences has probably never been more apparent, from the growing public awareness of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the aftermath of natural catastrophes, the terminal disease spread, and wars to the tangible feeling of communal, global trauma engendered by Covid-19. Trauma has taken one of the most diverse and, in some instances, extreme forms in the realm of popular cultural productions. The notion was first used in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to describe externally inflicted physical injuries. The fact that its definition has shifted dramatically to include psychic and mental disorders indicates that exact explanations of the term are as contentious and historically driven as the mental symptoms it has come to refer to. Conventionally, the notion of trauma has been related fundamentally to veterans' post-war psychological and physical experiences; however, the notion has attained more expanded diagnostic criteria since the 1980s, coinciding with an increase in public awareness and interest in trauma narratives.

Trauma has always been a pervasive condition of the imagination; thus, a range of literary and critical works have tried to grapple with the effects of trauma, arising from experiences ranging from wars, abuse, rape to ecological disasters and diseases. The pioneering work of a group of scholars, including Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, and Dominick LaCapra, has investigated literary forms of interpretation and persuasively argued that literature has been a binding site to articulate traumatic experiences, witness to trauma, and make the unspoken narratives more graspable. In *The Trauma Question*, Roger Luckhurst explores trauma with a focus on contemporary movies such as *Memento*, *21 Grams*, and *Elephant*, emphasizing that "innovations around the traumatic flashback, the narrative mosaic, and the temporal loop," imitate the traumatic experience through "memory dysfunction."¹ In these representations of trauma, "the demolition of body, memory, and self" serves as a means of eradicating traumatic memories "of burdened history and compromised, damaged selves."² Recently, the notion of trauma has been expanded beyond the individualistic level of trauma, implying the account of global ecological trauma as investigated in *Eco-Trauma Cinema* and *Diseases and Disorders in Contemporary Fiction: The Syndrome Syndrome*, presenting a new and distinctive form of trauma literature. It is evident that the subject of trauma has been and is currently pervading scholarly attention and literary fields. However, it is worth noting here that trauma has been slow to take hold in the context of theatre and performance, both in scholarship and practice. However, theatre always provides a critical site to stage potential post-traumatic symptoms, including "wordless and affectless states; loss of the ability to comprehend or

1 Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 206.

2 Ibid., 206.

use syntax; distortions of vision, taste, sound and touch and hallucinations.”³ In this regard, Patrick Duggan’s *Trauma-Tragedy: Symptoms of Contemporary Performance*; David Dean, Yana Meerzon, and Kathryn Prince’s edited volume *History, Memory, Performance*; and Miriam Haughton’s *Staging Trauma: Bodies in Shadow* have been invaluable contributions to addressing trauma in theatre and performance arts.

Conventionally, contemporary British theatre has always been a fertile ground for articulating trauma since it embodies ‘liveness’ and requires more individual attention than the written or digital can. To put it more clearly, theatre, by making use of the unique possibilities of live performance, can directly address social, cultural, and political issues. For instance, contemporary British theatre’s distinctive playwrights such as Sarah Kane, Martin Crimp, Mark Ravenhill, and Anthony Neilson, among others, also known as “Mrs. Thatcher’s disorientated children,”⁴ staged images which ranged across multifarious notions of traumatic suffering, highlighting the ongoing concern with the violent, visceral, and traumatic in performance. Their dramatic strategies have been mostly regarded as a critique of Thatcher’s socio-cultural legacy and England’s participation in international crises. One can, then, suggest that the range of representations in trauma narratives shifts the emphasis away from unrepresentability and toward its specificity, which locates meaning by paying more attention to the social and cultural circumstances of traumatic experience. In light of those preliminary observations, the main objective of this paper is to analyze Laura Wade’s first play, *Colder Than Here* (2005), in which traumatic experiences specific to contemporary culture are portrayed. Wade reflects inherently traumatic familial relationships, the condition of lonesome individuals, recent terminal cancer increases, and the anticipated death of the loved one. The paper, in this sense, first investigates the contemporary theoretical approach to the relationship between trauma and literary studies and then Wade’s unique portrayal of ‘traumaculture’ in *Colder Than Here*. The paper, therefore, indicates that *Colder Than Here* convincingly refers to trauma in a contemporary cultural context with regards to the Bradley family’s experiences in the face of the anticipated death of the loved one following the cancer diagnosis.

Contemporary Trauma Theory

Trauma has problematically become an increasingly over-used term in contemporary society. Central to the psycho-medical disciplines, the study of trauma has recently become more relevant in literary and cultural studies as Mark Seltzer convincingly contends that “the modern subject has become inseparable from the categories of shock and trauma.”⁵

3 Suzanne Little, “Repeating Repetition: Trauma and Performance”, *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, 20 (5), (2015), 45.

4 Amelia Howe Kritzer, *Political Theatre in Post-Thatcher Britain: New Writing 1995–2005* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), 28.

5 Mark Seltzer, “Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere”, *October* 80 (1997): 3-26.

The word permeates all levels of our interactions in the world, from the most personal and private traumas experienced throughout life. In other words, we now live in a society that is bound to its traumatic experiences, a society in which trauma has become a "cultural trope."⁶ Even though the rise of the trauma trope has pushed its meaning "to the point of meaninglessness," the relatively recent rise in trauma theory as a focus of academic interest has invigorated trauma as a frame through which cultural issues "of experience, memory, the body, and representation"⁷ can be examined. Roger Luckhurst defines contemporary British society as a "traumaculture,"⁸ emphasizing the fact that the related notion precisely reflects our current times and is commonly used in conjunction with the rise of "technological and statistical society that can generate, multiply and quantify the 'shocks' of modern life."⁹ He further argues, "Trauma has become a paradigm because it has been turned into a repertoire of compelling stories about the enigmas of identity, memory and selfhood that have saturated Western cultural life."¹⁰ There has been a notable academic turn to the questions of memory, trauma, and identity since 1980, triggering significant discussions in a range of critical and literary fields and considering trauma to exist not only in the physical and psychical realms but also in social and cultural contexts.

Contemporary trauma theory frequently draws on Freud, referring to a psychological 'wound'¹¹ rather than a physical one. Trauma is, according to Freud, "an experience which within a short period of time presents the mind with an increase of stimulus too powerful to be dealt with."¹² Caroline Garland points out that Freud's definition, together with his assumptions in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, "provide the basis for all later psychoanalytic developments in the fields of trauma."¹³ In synch with Garland, Cathy Caruth revisits the Freudian model, in its more general terms, defines trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena."¹⁴ She further notes that "trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is the

6 Christina Wald, *Hysteria, Trauma and Melancholia: Performative Maladies in Contemporary Anglophone Drama* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 3.

7 *Ibid.*, 3.

8 Roger Luckhurst, "Traumaculture", *New Formulations* 50 (2003), 28.

9 Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 19.

10 *Ibid.*, 80.

11 Trauma derives from the Greek word meaning wound. First used in English in the seventeenth century in medicine, it referred to a bodily injury caused by an external agent. See Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 2 and Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996), 3.

12 Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis, Part III: General Theory of the Neuroses*. Standard Ed. Vol. 16. (London: Hogarth P, 1963), 275.

13 Caroline Garland, *Understanding Trauma a Psychoanalytical Approach*. 2nd ed. (London: Karnac, 2002), 18.

14 Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 11.

story of a wound that cries out."¹⁵ The responses to traumatic experiences such as war, rape, abuse, accidents, diseases, and natural disasters have been understood in terms of the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder since 1980. *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* defines post-traumatic stress disorder as "*the development of characteristic symptoms following exposure to one or more traumatic events.*"¹⁶ The traumatized individual also shows "*[m]arked physiological reactions to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event(s).*"¹⁷ Garland further remarks on the phenomenon as follows:

*It is because it is overwhelming and incapacitating, and cannot be managed psychically, that an event can be defined as traumatic. Flexible and creative thought is replaced by nightmares, flashbacks and at times unconsciously driven re-enactments of the event...The experience cannot, in the usual way, be contained in the mind through thought.*¹⁸

As the above quotation indicates, a traumatic event does not occur only once. Thus, the problematic point is not just the response to any terrible incident but, rather, the unique experience of surviving. As Caruth investigates, "*for those who undergo trauma, it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic; that survival itself, in other words, can be a crisis.*"¹⁹ Since trauma "*resists simple comprehension,*"²⁰ it is worth reminding that trauma remains incomprehensible for the sufferer and cannot be fully incorporated into the individual's understanding of his or her own history. To put it more clearly, trauma experience can never be wholly comprehended; the traumatized individuals are "*liminal personae (threshold people,*)"²¹ who are both drawn to and strive to relieve their trauma. Those individuals attempt to both recall and forget, thereby becoming detached spectators of their own trauma. Trauma is not intrinsically connected to the traumatized individual, but it does attach itself to the individual; thus, it can never be fully occupied or possessed.

Early scholarship has popularized the idea of trauma as an incomprehensible phenomenon. Caruth highlights the psychological dimensions of trauma, limiting its variability and cultural specificity, and notes that "*the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it.*"²² Contemporary trauma theory rejects this earlier definition of trauma as "*repetitious, timeless, and unspeakable, yet, it is also a literal, contagious, and mummified.*"²³

15 Ibid., 4.

16 *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5*. 5th ed. (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), 274.

17 Ibid., 271.

18 Garland, *Understanding Trauma*, 64.

19 Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995), 9.

20 Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 6.

21 Victor Turner, "Liminality and Communitas", in *The Performance Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Bial, 2nd ed. (Didcot: Routledge, 2007), 89.

22 Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 92.

23 Michelle Balaev, *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 151.

With a particular emphasis on "*the ranging values and representations of trauma in literature and society*,"²⁴ contemporary literary trauma theory provides new methodologies to evaluate the traumatic experiences within social and cultural contexts. In this regard, the literary imagination allows for multifaceted engagements with trauma, providing both the potential of emotional identification and critical reflection. The capacity of literary imagination to recontextualize can provide a site in which trauma that resists comprehension and verbalization can be investigated from multiple perspectives. As Laurie Vickroy asserts, literary texts not only transform "*terrifying, alien experiences [into] more understandable and accessible*" but also provide a means of "*witnessing or testifying for the history and experience of historically [traumatized] people*."²⁵ In similar terms with Vickroy, Anne Whitehead writes, literary trauma texts contextualize "*the denied, the repressed, and the forgotten*."²⁶ To paraphrase Whitehead, the fundamental contradiction of trauma narratives is exposed by literary trauma texts. In other words, they attempt to convey a traumatic experience that resists conventional processes of representation, narration, and comprehension. In this regard, literary imagination provides a binding site to present the unrepresentable, narrate the unnarratable, and make sense of the incomprehensible.

Notwithstanding the implications regarding the early scholarship's emphasis on the incomprehensibility of trauma, it is significant to note that the representation of trauma in literary narratives "*issues a challenge to the capacities of narrative knowledge*," addressing the tensions between "*narrative possibility*" and "*impossibility*."²⁷ The literary imagination, thus, challenges the capacity of language by creating imaginary spaces in which incomprehensible and unspeakable traumatic experiences can be reconfigured into new ones. In this sense, theatre's textual and visual possibilities render it a crucial site to perform trauma. When the words are inadequate to address the traumatic experiences, gaps, silences, and bodily articulations make the silence audible onstage. More importantly, theatre's distinctive features, including "*skills like radical empathy, deep listening, collective embodied practice, and a sense of community – all central to theatre*"²⁸ enable playwrights to address traumatic experiences of individuals and provide a safe space that inspires empathy and allows for testimonial encounters. The centralizing of the subject of trauma onstage can be manifested through various modalities, such as "*bodies, motion, space, affect, image, and words*,"²⁹ which function as a potential component to communicate traumatic experiences and thereby theatre emerges as a cultural

24 Ibid., 6.

25 Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 221-222.

26 Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 82.

27 Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 79, 80, 83.

28 Theresa J. May, "Radical Empathy, Embodied Pedagogy, and Climate Change Theatre." *HowlRound* April 20, 2016.

29 Shannon Jackson, *Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy from Philology to Performativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 13.

representation to be celebrated due to its ability to stage trauma by appealing to the feelings through story and performance. As the following discussion explores, in *Colder Than Here*, Wade reflects the Bradley family's encounter with the idea of dying and their attempts to negotiate this traumatic experience. Wade uniquely portrays the characters' condition of trauma through specific traumatic incidents, gestures, bodily articulations, and silences onstage. In the play, trauma exists in the past, it remains in the present, and it will probably pervade the future, disrupting the narratives of self.

The Reflections of 'Traumaculture' in Laura Wade's *Colder Than Here* (2005)

By then Laura Wade's one-act play, *Colder Than Here*, was premiered by the Soho Theatre London in 2005, Wade was a graduate of the Royal Court's Young Writers Programme. Philip Fisher reviews the play and writes, "*With its strong cast and sure direction from Soho's artistic director, Abigail Morris, Colder than Here is a wonderful introduction to the work of Laura Wade and its bittersweet combination of morbid black comedy and heartrending pathos is a pleasure.*"³⁰ The play presents the 'traumaculture' that confronts us in the contemporary world, afflicted by ecological discussions such as ozone holes and global warming, and terminal cancer types, which contaminate bodies. The play further tangles up the questions of family relationships, lonesome individuals, and ecological deterioration. Indeed, the play revolves around the issue of trauma, arising from "*these tangled objects,*"³¹ whose causes and consequences have been knotted into the contemporary notion of trauma.³² In this regard, Wade reflects the contemporary 'traumaculture' through white English middle-class family, the Bradleys, who "*are bodies of time and space in flux and in crisis, provoked by a forthcoming traumatic encounter, death, which is knowable and unknowable, a central paradigm of trauma.*"³³ The family members are subject to this traumatic encounter and the anticipated death of the mother, Myra, who is "*riddled with [bone cancer].*"³⁴ Drawing on Rob Nixon's 'slow violence' theory, Miriam Haughton points out the relationship between cancer increases and the destruction of the natural environment, regarding the play's concern for both deteriorations of the body and the earth.³⁵ According to Nixon, "*Stories of toxic buildup, massing greenhouse gases, or desertification may be cataclysmic in which casualties are deferred, often for generations.*"³⁶

30 Philip Fisher, "Colder Than Here," *British Theatre Guide*. Retrieved from: <https://www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/colderthanhere-rev.htm>

31 Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans. C. Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 66.

32 Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 15.

33 Miriam Haughton, *Staging Trauma: Bodies in Shadow* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 81.

34 Laura Wade, *Colder Than Here* in *Laura Wade Palys One* (London: Oberon, 2012), 25.

35 Haughton, *Staging Trauma*, 101.

36 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence, Gender and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011), 3.

That is, deterioration of the earth causes contamination of the body over the generations; however, the incidents whose effects, although devastating, are not immediate, profound, or impressive, resist comprehension and urgent attention.³⁷ It is, therefore, no coincidence that Wade strikingly draws attention to the phenomenon by creating liminal spaces where graveyards and living rooms are in fluid connection to each other. As the following discussion shows, the characters eat at the cemeteries and walk into the coffin in the living room. These stark images aim to shock the audience into recognition of this imminent crisis, revealed through the anticipated death of the matriarch and its effects on the survivor-sufferer family members.

On trauma and death, Caruth argues that the crisis at the core of many traumatic narratives often emerges as “*the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival.*”³⁸ To paraphrase Caruth, it is not clear for trauma survivor-sufferers that the trauma occurs following the encounter with death or the ongoing experience of having survived it. In the play, this crisis lies at the heart of the play’s traumatic thematic content. The members of the Bradley family search for ways to cope with Myra’s cancer diagnosis, her anticipated death, and the uncertain future without her. Wade’s representation of those characters’ experiences of trauma onstage can offer a safe space in which they perform their stories to survive. The survivor-sufferers experience persistent dissociative symptoms of detachment from the world. Yet, they can perform their stories, which may help communicate the pain and uncertainty caused by the ongoing traumatic experience. According to Patrick Duggan, “*contemporary trauma theory suggests a performative bent in traumatic suffering,*”³⁹ using embodied performance as a vehicle and inviting silenced traumatic experience to take center stage for the purpose of healing. Jennifer L. Griffiths emphasizes that performance occurs through the body onstage; thus, the “*testimonial encounter*” that happens on a bodily level, “*rather than simply by creating a narrative language*”⁴⁰ makes it more appealing. Then, it is possible to argue that embodied performance enables the survivor-sufferers to perform the symptoms of their suffering. In Dominick LaCapra’s terms: “*Working through trauma involves the effort to articulate or rearticulate affect and representation in a manner that may never transcend, but may to some viable extent counteract, a reenactment, or acting out, of that disabling dissociation.*”⁴¹ LaCapra suggests that survivor-sufferers ‘act out’ compulsive repetition of actions, words, and situations from traumatic occurrences. This process of ‘acting out’ paves the way for the

37 Cancer Research UK states that over the last decade, incidence rates for all cancers combined have increased by a twentieth (5%) in the UK. *Cancer Incidence Statistics*, Retrieved from: <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org> 5th March 2020.

38 Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 7.

39 Patrick Duggan, *Trauma-Tragedy: Symptoms of Contemporary Performance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 5.

40 Jennifer L. Griffiths, *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women’s Writing and Performance* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 2.

41 Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 42.

process of ‘working through,’ which is defined as an active articulatory practice that enables the survivor-sufferers to realize the difference between the past and present, offering hope for the future.⁴² This repetition compulsion is central to contemporary trauma theory, which offers a “*healthy analytic process of ‘working through.’*”⁴³

The encounter with death has always been a tough subject for playwrights to address, and any understanding of such an event will always be incomplete.⁴⁴ Perhaps the incomplete nature of this traumatic experience and its resistance to comprehension and temporal linearity are also what make it compelling viewing for the audience. However, Wade’s representation of the Bradleys’ encounter with death onstage reveals that trauma requires ‘acting out’ in order to ‘work through.’ In the context of contemporary trauma theory, trauma is an active phenomenon that pierces borders, creates new pathways for communication, and is transmissible beyond the initial sufferer and instance. Thus, trauma can allow splits between the past and present, has the power to fracture selfhood, and its instigation of processes of reconstruction and repetition defies linear boundaries. As Luckhurst and others have observed, it is capable of being transmitted beyond the sufferer. Thus, it shares similar performative communication and time-shifting properties with that of theatre. In this regard, the present approach investigates the traumatic bent in trauma in a creative and explorative way. As Sierz mentions, “*Colder Than Here is more honest and humane in unflinchingly showing the way that people face the inevitable, with humour, with silence, sometimes clumsily, sometimes stoically, and ultimately with love.*”⁴⁵ Setting death as its context, the play allows us to reconsider our responses to the traumatic encounter with the anticipated death of a loved one. In this way, the play presses us to re-think the status of death concerning dramatizations of trauma on the stage. Considering LaCapra and Luckhurst’s point of view, the representation of the abstract idea of death through concrete images such as graveyard visits, the coffin in the living room, and the funeral wishes presentation enable the survivor-sufferers to perform their stories onstage and share a common space and time with the audience. Theatre, hence, offers splendid occasions to stage bodily whispers behind the words, where narrative language fails to communicate trauma.

The play opens in “*A burial ground in the West Midlands. The site is young, the trees just a few years old and still spindly. There are no headstones—graves are marked by shrubs or trees with the occasional wooden plaque.*”⁴⁶ The depiction of the burial ground challenges certain long-held beliefs about cemetery design and mood, making the idea of death more accessible and graspable. Wade characterizes the site as ‘young,’ despite the fact that the usual connection of graveyards is with old age. The fact that the trees are still growing adds to the

42 Ibid., 21-22.

43 Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 9.

44 Ibid., 6.

45 Alex Sierz, “Introduction,” in *Laura Wade Plays One* (London: Oberon, 2012), 7.

46 Wade, *Colder Than Here*, 14.

dynamism and vivacity of the scene, offering no static emptiness but growth. The gravestones with 'no headstones' are still marked, but in a manner that blurs the line between life and death. It is pertinent and vital to note here that the overall atmosphere of the graveyard is nuanced, and it becomes more interesting when Myra and her daughter Jenna appear on stage with a large picnic basket. Myra seems "surprisingly energetic" and Jenna "wears mostly black, with a long stripy scarf."⁴⁷ The scene further informs the audience that Myra is diagnosed with advanced bone cancer, perplexing the scene's atmosphere. The dramatic construction of the scene offers a stimulating perspective to the study of trauma. In other words, trauma studies mostly deal with past events, which overwhelm the individual's present condition of the senses and the mind, known as post-traumatic stress disorder. However, Wade reflects the individuals' contemporary "structure of feeling," embodied in a performance mode that is acutely concerned with addressing the traumatic, which Patrick Duggan has termed "trauma-tragedy."⁴⁸ According to Duggan, individuals' contemporary social 'psychic' condition can be identified with Raymond Williams's notion of 'structure of feeling,' realized through the anticipated death of the loved one and the present moment of living consciously with the acknowledgment of death. As the stage instructions inform us, Myra and Jenna visit the graveyard to have a picnic. They begin to eat their sandwiches while talking about their daily routines. Suddenly, Myra asks, "Do you think we should bury me here [in] Six months or so. Up to about nine."⁴⁹ Myra goes on as follows, "Perhaps you could tell your dad about it, the burial thing [...] I mean there may come a time when you two need to learn to talk to each other..."⁵⁰ The quotation is indicative of the lack of communication between these nuclear family members. Wade portrays the Bradley family's disrupted selves who 'need to learn to talk to each other'. In this regard, it is possible to argue that any forms of post-traumatic stress disorder such as nightmares or hallucinations do not occur on stage. Trauma is revealed through recent cultural traumatic experiences, including each character's loneliness, cancer diagnosis, and the anticipated death. Thus, the Bradley family is inherently traumatic, and now they have to negotiate the expected death of the matriarch, performing their testimonies individually onstage.

As Duggan investigates, "Trauma is a disruption of the self, or self-composure; it is a perpetual disruption of personal time which questions understandings of self because it recurs without anticipation continually to call into question our comprehension of the world and our movements through it."⁵¹ It is, therefore, significant to emphasize that the family members' selves are disrupted due to the encounter with the idea of death, and the dysfunctional interpersonal relationships between them suggest a more comprehensive traumatic experience. As the play's title indicates, the overarching metaphor is the sense of the coldness of death,

47 Ibid., 15.

48 Duggan, *Trauma-Tragedy*, 7.

49 Wade, *Colder Than Here*, 18.

50 Ibid., 21.

51 Duggan, *Trauma-Tragedy*, 27.

which is grounded in a feeling that the emotional atmosphere in the family is likewise cold and disrupted. Sierz convincingly contends that “*The coolness of their relationships is emphasized by the fact that the boiler in the household has broken down, and that daily life is lived in a damp chilliness, which feels like a symbolic preparation for the grave.*”⁵² To paraphrase Sierz, the relationship between family members is frozen. The playwright refers to the coldness of the condition through the boiler, which has been broken down and remained broken until the end of the play. In each scene, Myra always complains about the coldness of the house; also, Jenna emphasizes it, saying, “*fucking cold here.*”⁵³ More strikingly, while Alec and Jenna are looking for a graveyard in “*A civil cemetery in Coventry,*” Alec articulates that “*Well, it is warmer than the house. Everywhere is warmer than the house.*”⁵⁴ Alec’s statement is crucial to highlight that Wade employs a compositional style, which intentionally tries to create a constant sense of traumatic presence, a traumatic reality through theatricality. In a society where representations of traumatic loneliness have become normalized, Wade’s portrayal of it in a graveyard through Alec’s statement seems too striking for the British public to ignore.

The following scene switches to the Bradleys’ living room, where Myra talks about the process of “*more radio. Painkillers. Warm baths. Funeral Planning,*” while Alec “*is immobile behind his newspaper.*”⁵⁵ Jenna criticizes Alec’s indifference to the situation, saying, “*Mum is dying and you’re sitting there reading the paper.*”⁵⁶ The scene clearly addresses the anxious family interaction in unstable spaces regarding the anticipated death and the dysfunction between them. Their search for familial co-existence without Myra invites the audience to register the pain and sorrow in this simple character’s voice. Therefore, the scene presents the entire traumatic narrative through the potentially overwhelming depictions of pain with pauses, fragments, and broken narration. When they realize that Alec buys the wrong cat food, the family members face the ongoing experience of having survived the trauma. Myra says, “*I’m sorry. Your Dad’s been doing the shopping. I haven’t been [...] (JENNA bits her lip) I should have told him which sort to get [...] (Pause) There’ll be just your dad here and ... (Long pause) [...] (Harriet looks away [...]) Another long pause. No eye contact: four people alone.*”⁵⁷ As the quotation shows, trauma is presented as overwhelming, and it appears omnipresent in this scene. Here, Wade’s voice in combination with the long reflective pauses conveys a sense of affirmation of trauma and invites the audience to witness others’ traumas. As LaCapra emphasizes, “*The looks and gestures of survivors also call for reading and understanding. At times, nothing can be more graphic and significant than the body language, including the facial expressions, of the survivor-witness [...]*”⁵⁸ Considering LaCapra’s point of view, the

52 Sierz, “Introduction,” 8.

53 Wade, *Colder Than Here*, 27.

54 Ibid., 49.

55 Ibid., 25.

56 Ibid., 35-36.

57 Ibid., 31.

58 LaCapra, *Writing History*, xiv.

potential exists for the representations of contemporary psychic condition that can speak to the exigencies of our current traumatic experiences within the embodied performance. The survivor-sufferers relieve their individual grief in the safe space created by the particularities of live performance. This relief process occurs as a communal experience, providing meaningful and unique moments through which trauma can be comprehended. Hence, the testimonial encounter that happens on a bodily level can fill the gap left by our own psychic trauma of detachment from the world. Although the performers perform their testimonies individually, this process occurs as a part of a shared experience; thus, it can offer a variety of possibilities for the survivor-sufferers, defying linear boundaries and being transmitted beyond them.

Myra inhabits a liminal space between life and the anticipated death that disrupts her perception of daily existence and linear time. Thus, she tries to negotiate her anticipated death by establishing new performed routines. She watches documentaries about dying, reads about funerals, and delivers a PowerPoint presentation to summarize her funeral wishes, including "*no funeral director [...] woodland burial [...] cardboard coffin [...] bury me in warm clothes [...] coffin to be carried by family [...] no throwing flowers.*"⁵⁹ Myra states that she wants her coffin to be decorated with the sky and the stars. Myra's attempt to negotiate her ongoing traumatic experience is emotionally destructive for the Bradleys. Although Alec seems surprised by Myra's decision to be buried, saying, "*But we've always – I mean it's, it's in the wills,*" Jenna supports this decision, arguing, "*Cremation's bad. For the environment. It is a pollutant.*"⁶⁰ On the one hand, the quotation is indicative of the diversity of religious faith and society's approach to death, evoking prejudices surrounding the issues of religion, environment, social, and cultural trends. The quotation, on the other hand, offers that the play recontextualizes death as an open topic for family conversation, although it is not so easy. The Bradleys inhabit a threshold space, which restrains them from settling into a new structure that may exist. Along with Myra, they also establish new performed routines, including the repetitive graveyard and hospital visits and attempts to reconfigure their dysfunctional familial relationships. When Jenna complains about that, Harriet consciously responds, "*mum's disappearing and you're still fucking about like – Like it's your own disaster. It's not about you now.*"⁶¹ The quotation emphasizes the fact that the anticipated death of Myra has altered their daily life in every respect, disrupting their linear narratives of self. Thus, negotiating this traumatic event becomes more complicated and destructive. Then, Jenna goes on, "*I miss her. Like the other day, I got home from work and it was a shit day and – I. Wanted her there. And I got home and. Just gripped by it. Desperately wanted her. Lying in bed, crying my eyes out and there's no-one else, no-one else is good enough.*"⁶² Obviously, this emotionally destructive traumatic

59 Wade, *Colder Than Here*, 35-36.

60 Ibid., 35.

61 Ibid., 38.

62 Ibid., 41.

experience disrupts their self-composure. Turning to LaCapra's notions of 'act out' and 'work through,' it is worthwhile to add one point here: the survivor-sufferers individually perform the symptoms of their suffering onstage. They 'act out' compulsive repetition of actions and situations from traumatic occurrences, such as frequent graveyard and hospital visits and attempts to establish more intimate familial relationships. The cycles of uncomprehending repetition forge the process of 'working through,' which allows trauma to repeat and represent itself. The dramaturgical construction of the play, thus, follows a structure that can be seen to mimic that of trauma symptoms.

To find an appropriate burial site for Myra, the Bradleys visit cemeteries in different parts of the country. In scene five, Alec and Jenna appear in a civil cemetery in Coventry, "*which has cordoned off a small corner of its land as a vague gesture to the natural burial movement. No-one has yet been buried here and it's not difficult to see why – the cemetery is run-down and grim, surrounded by industrial buildings. The natural burial site is little more than a patch of earth.*"⁶³ Along with Myra's cancer diagnosis and her rejection of being cremated as it causes pollution, the cemetery design directs the play's attention to the current environmental degradation. As Houghton emphasizes, "*the contaminated body of Myra is calling to the contaminated earth-body.*"⁶⁴ The cemetery design establishes a connection between the contaminated natural environment and contaminated bodies, inevitably reproducing death as the play suggests. Myra's body has been violated by cancer, which can be viewed as a tragedy of "*slow-motion of toxicity,*"⁶⁵ the consequences of which have been ignored for generations. Wade artistically employs the scenic space, turning prolonged instances of slow violence into dramatic narratives to evoke public awareness. The idea of an eco-friendly coffin, situated in the Bradleys' living room, also reinforces these instances whose ramifications have given rise to the most pressing concerns of our time.

Wade situates Myra's environmentally friendly coffin centre stage to make it a part of daily existence. Jenna touches it and says, "*need some cushions, make it nice in there.*"⁶⁶ Then, Jenna and Harriet begin to draw the sky, clouds, and stars on the coffin. Situating the coffin centre stage, Wade encourages the family to touch it, draw on it, and, more importantly, normalize the idea of death and burial. In this way, Wade enables the Bradleys to negotiate death trauma, reducing their incomprehensible fear regarding it. Furthermore, the dramatized family attempts to make sense of and find value in their traumatic experience. Their repetitive graveyard visits, their daily conversations on cancer, Myra's funeral wishes take the issue of death out of the realm of the unspeakable and insert it into the daily routine. Thus, the play allows the subject of death to share a common space and time with the audience, making it more understandable.

63 Ibid., 49.

64 Houghton, *Staging Trauma*, 98.

65 Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 3.

66 Wade, *Colder Than Here*, 54.

Considering LaCapra's aforementioned notions of 'act out' and 'work through,' the Bradleys individually repeat actions and situations from their traumatic experiences in order to enable trauma 'work through.' If the play loosely binds these elements together, then it may be because the dramatic construction allows the incomprehensible to be represented on stage. The family members and the audience witness Myra's present trauma, who tries to reappropriate herself to the situation, spending time in the coffin. Harriet remarks on the phenomenon as follows:

*You know, I went to mum's the other day, just to check up on her and stuff. Walked in and she's sat in the coffin. Middle of the living room floor and she's—She's watching 'Have I Got News For You' and she's laughing. Sitting in it, laughing. And I just thought God, I can't cope with this I can't do this. I was looking at her and I missed her.*⁶⁷

As the quotation indicates, the Bradleys individually perform their traumatic sufferings, bearing witness to each other's experience that cannot be entirely comprehended and that might have otherwise remained unspoken and unheard. In *Colder Than Here*, trauma acts out in the present, repeats and represents itself during the live performance, transcends comprehension, then works through. For the Bradleys, who have difficulty expressing their love, occupying the common spaces, and sharing their feelings, the scenic and dramatic spaces offer unique moments in which they bear witness to the survivor-sufferers' testimonies. Fostering intimate bonds that generate meanings in both personal and social contexts, the play offers promising possibilities for their familial co-existence without Myra. Jenna says, "I used to notice, going to the loo in the middle of the night, I'd be walking down a corridor of closed doors. Like a hotel. Four separate people.... So, I don't know if—If we never had that even with you here, I don't know if we'll do it without you."⁶⁸ The final scene reveals that the Bradleys are aware of the dysfunctional family relations, but it also offers the possibility of action by recognizing the condition. In this context, this inherently traumatic family, tied to the 'traumaculture,' attempts at making sense of and finding value in their traumatic experience. In this sense, the dramatic space allows them to search for possibilities for their unknown future without the matriarch Myra.

Conclusion

Trauma has always been a pervasive condition in the literary imagination, allowing for nuanced engagements with trauma. The potential of literary imagination to reconfigure provides an arena in which trauma that resists comprehension and verbalization can be explored from multiple perspectives. Even though trauma has been slow to take hold in theatre and performance arts, both in scholarship and practice, contemporary British theatre has been a crucial venue for playwrights to address individual and collective traumatic experiences. The aforementioned

67 Ibid., 63.

68 Ibid., 74.

contemporary trauma critics, who convincingly challenge the earlier definition of trauma as incomprehensible and unspeakable, contend that trauma can represent itself in literary texts. Affirming this position, contemporary trauma theory situates trauma not only in the physical and psychical realms but also in social and cultural contexts. In the context of contemporary trauma theory, trauma offers a critical pathway to communication, expanding beyond the initial survivor-sufferer and occurrence. Trauma further creates splits between the past and present, has the power to fracture selfhood and, its instigation of processes of reconstruction and repetition defies linear boundaries. Hence, capable of being transmitted beyond the sufferer, trauma shares similar performative communication and time-shifting properties with that of theatre. By making use of theatre's textual and visual possibilities, the playwrights boldly stage traumatic suffering, highlighting the ongoing concern with the traumatic in dramatic and scenic spaces. Drawing on Roger Luckhurst's notion of 'traumaculture,' this paper indicates that the contemporary British stage reflects our current experiences, selves, and relationships as inherently traumatic. As the paper explores, in *Colder Than Here* (2005), Laura Wade reflects an English middle-class family whose traumatic experiences derive not only from the anticipated death of the matriarch but also familial dysfunction, a traumatic condition that pervades daily existence, and current consequences of environmental degradation. Wade reflects the sense of traumatic presence with striking images and occurrences, including repetitive familial graveyard visitations, an Ikea-like coffin situated in the middle of the living room, and a funeral wish list presentation. In this sense, Wade's theatrical strategy helps the survivor-sufferers 'act out' trauma in the safe space offered by the particularities of live performance. This process of 'acting out' enables trauma to 'work through,' opening up possibilities for the survivor-sufferers to make sense of and find value in their traumatic experiences. As analyzed in *Colder Than Here*, in a society where representations of traumatic sufferings have been normalized, Wade's portrayal of the traumatic experience with stark images, including burial sites, coffin, and Myra's contaminated body seems too difficult for British society to ignore.

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