Journal of American Studies of Turkey
41 (2015): 45-68

American Undercurrents in the 21st Century: Trauma, Transformation, and the Reader as Witness in Nicole Krauss's *Man Walks into a Room*

Laura Virginia Castor

Abstract

In *Man Walks into a Room*, Nicole Krauss offers valuable ways of thinking about 11 September's prehistory, and to some extent, its aftermath. She does so through her exploration of the consciousness of the main character, Samson Greene's consciousness. This development includes careful attention to a sense of place in historical context that allows a space for the reader's role to emerge as witness. As such, Krauss's narration urges readers to consider tensions between individual freedom and loneliness, and between American progressive ideals and more fragile, post 11 September global identities.

Keywords

Post 9/11 literature, trauma theory, literature of the American West, witness literature.

The title of Nicole Krauss's first novel *Man Walks into a Room* (2002) motivates her reader to take an active role in making sense of who and what exactly this text is about. Aside from the fact that the book was published in 2002 and that Krauss is a New Yorker, why should we read it actively in the context of post 9/11 early 21st century America? Although the collective American experience has included trauma as an ongoing theme long before 11 September11 September 2001, this issue is not one that has been integrated very well with American ideas about self-reliance, national unity, and progress, all of which remain very present in the popular and

political imagination.[1] It may be that until 9/11, the US has been one of the few nations in the world that has not been obligated by circumstances to include trauma into its mainstream identity in an immediate way.

At first we may not see how Krauss addresses trauma, nor may we read this novel as a "post 9/11" work of fiction. Yet I would like to suggest that in *Man Walks into a Room,* Krauss offers valuable ways of thinking about 11 September, especially its prehistory, and to some extent, its aftermath. She does so through careful attention to a sense of place in historical context, and with the intention of creating a space for the reader's role to emerge as witness.

Her narrative leads readers to connect the events of 9/11 with, rather than seeing them as breaking from, larger collective American memories. These memories can be traced to the explosion of the first atomic bomb over Hiroshima on 6 August 1945. From this historical moment, humans have had to consider the possibility of our own extinction. Collective American memory in our time therefore includes an undercurrent of trauma as catalyzing transformative power in the American psyche. This power is one which may be more fruitfully described by its effects than defined. Transformation involves change, but not the kind of change that can be predicted or orchestrated to meet a predetermined goal or anticipated outcome.[2]

In *Man Walks into a Room*, the awareness of 9/11's prehistory in the bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki can engage the reader to not only empathize with characters, but also to place their situations in

1 Krauss indicates that this idea is important to our understanding of the novel in her epitaph, a passage from Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance": You shall not discern the footprints of any other; you shall not see the face of man; you shall not hear any name—"

2 Transformation is more fundamental than that, and involves a submitting to the death of one form and the becoming of another. It is about letting go of one identity and allowing for something new, and possibly more resilient. Allowing for vulnerability is part of the transformative process. As valuable as this process may be for long-term individual and collective survival, it has not been familiar or welcomed in the popular American imagination. Represented obliquely through fiction, however, the "inconvenient truths" of our time and history (as Al Gore referred to the problem of climate change in his film of that name) may be held in a less threatening way that may allow for slow, subtle changes in the reader's awareness to happen.

larger contexts that help us understand structures of injustice (Kaplan). By witnessing, I mean more than the ability to empathize with a particular person or character. To witness is to comprehend the patterns of structures that give rise to trauma with an eye on trying to reduce the likelihood that it will happen again. (Kaplan 23). This approach provides a moral counterweight to the posture taken by the US government's "War on Terror" in that the emphasis is more on understanding conditions in their complexity, than in defending against their most obvious and crude consequences.

Within the growing body of scholarship on contemporary American Jewish women writers, Krauss is considered among the most influential (Zierler 107). In her writing as a whole, which includes poetry and short fiction, as well as two other novels, The *History of Love* (2005), and *Great House* (2010), Krauss engages her reader to witness American and Jewish collective memories since the Second World War. Krauss's interest is in investigating "how people respond to the past by recreating themselves," and in finding the opportunity, through writing and reading, to "sit with the difficult things" that one has experienced directly, or inherited from the past" (Krauss "We Create Who We Are").

To my knowledge, there has been little scholarly criticism on *Man Walks into a Room.*[3] However, historical insights relevant for making sense of the post-9/11 threads in Krauss's first novel have been developed in recent studies of *The History of Love* and *Great House*.[4] Krauss's concern with the idea of "postmemory" is especially relevant. This term, coined by Marianne Hirsch, refers to the ways in which the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors experience the trauma passed on through hearing the stories told by their parents and grandparents about the horrors of the war. One of the central and compelling issues for writers such as Krauss, then, is the issue of postmemory of her parents and grandparents, and in particular

3 In "Mapping the Syndrome Novel" Burn discusses *Man Walks into a Room* as an examination of the "recurring theme of the amnesiac" through Krauss's characterization of Samson Greene. Stedman describes the novel as one of a number of recent examples in literature that attempt to use advances in neuroscience to develop the consciousness of characters.

4 Lang coined "third generation Holocaust writer" as more appropriate than "third generation survivor" as used by earlier critics.

the question of how to maintain an imaginative connection with ancestors who survived, or who didn't survive. [5]

The trajectory for examining pre-histories of 9/11, one that I will argue Krauss develops in *Man Walks into a Room,* follows an opposite, or perhaps complementary, path. Whereas Holocaust memories begin with the direct and extreme experience of pain and consequent trauma, the constructed grand narratives of American collective memory begin with an illusion that self-reliance (to use Emerson's words that Krauss places as an epitaph at the beginning of the novel) is possible for everyone in America. It begins with the ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence, which many forget was also a declaration of war written and signed by men who owned slaves.[6]

In both cases, the collective past haunts Americans, but for different reasons. It haunts the third-generation Holocaust writers because they feel an ethical responsibility for filling the gaps of the huge losses, and of maintaining an empathic connection to their ancestors who were obvious victims. Conversely, it is the collective past of the other side of the Holocaust, what happened at Hiroshima, that haunts the American popular imagination precisely because, as Walter A. Davis observes, "guilt, for us, is that which we must evacuate" (Davis 9). For Davis, and I suggest for Krauss in *Man Walks into a Room,* the reversal of guilt and subsequent healing can take place "only when we are willing to plumb the depths of our collective disorder" (Davis 9).

Through her development of various characters in *Man Walks into a Room,* Krauss both expresses and questions mainstream American ideas about the self-reliant individual. Considering the elements of the collective American past that have for many, remained shadows to turn away from, the individual has only apparently escaped the corruptions and complexities of history. He or she therefore seems free to reinvent him

5 See Codde's discussion of postmemory, 675-676. The connections Krauss develops are not exclusively tied to trauma postmemory, but also include intertextual links with other narratives, and relationships with different generations and people in other places across the globe. For Workman among other critics, the risk is a loss of ethical clarity in the midst of "a near over-abundance of fiction" (Workman 8).

6 Morrison refers to this illusion as the "racial imaginary" in her essay, "Home" (Morrison 8).

or herself on the landscape, especially the landscape represented by ideas about the American West.

The idea of the West has had a powerful hold on the American popular imagination since the mid-1800s when the journalist John O'Sullivan coined the term "Manifest Destiny." (O'Sullivan). Historically it has been represented in a variety of disciplines ranging from history and intellectual history, to literary history, anthropology, ethnology, linguistics, art history, and film studies.[7] Two of the most influential intellectual historians of the American West during the latter part of the 20th century were Patricia Nelson Limerick, beginning with her *Legacy of Conquest* (1985) and Richard White in *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West* (1991).[8] The view of these "New Western historians" was that the history of the West was shaped not by "destiny" but rather by conflict and power, especially conflict with the original and earlier inhabitants of that land.[9]

One central conflict that Limerick has helped us to rethink was expressed at the end of the 19th century in Frederick Jackson Turner's presentation at the Chicago Exposition in 1893. Turner's thesis on "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," characterized American identity as a conflict between the force of successive waves of civilizing

7 One particularly noteworthy set of publications was circulated in John C. Frémont's accounts of his expeditions to the West from 1838 to 1844. Frémont believed that the land needed to have use in order to be valuable, and as such he described the Western deserts as worthless expanses. Published at about the same time that the O'Sullivan wrote about America's "Manifest Destiny," Frémont's ideas may have influenced O'Sullivan.

8 See also Drinnon's analysis of "the metaphysics of Indian-Hating" and David Noble's numerous intellectual histories critiquing the idea of Manifest Destiny in the American psychic imagination. See especially his *Death of a Nation* (2002).

9 Etulain explains, "Limerick frequently noted the large limitations of Turner's frontier thesis. Ethnic, racial, and class competitions; the destructive power of capitalism; and the maltreatment of the environment—these became the dominant subjects in New Western histories. And in these histories, conflict took center stage" (Etulain 16). Etulain notes that this view gained increasing acceptance among teachers and students of American Western history in the late 1980s until the mid-1990s, when scholars such as Elliot West recognized a "West rife with cultural contacts leading to competition and conflict but also a region sometimes encouraging cultural conversations and even a few combinations" (Etulain 16).

groups on the one hand, and wilderness on the other. These forces met, in his view, at the border of a continually shrinking area of "free" land (Turner).

Turner's Frontier Thesis initiated a wide body of scholarship on the evolving psychic role of the West in American collective memory. In Krauss's novel, his approach is represented in the description of Ray Malcolm's Clearwater lab:

> Built in a 1940s spa, Ray had said, a failed attempt by a tycoon to attract the rich for the curative effects of the semiarid climate. Mineral baths from the salts of dry lake beds. Open spaces, rugged mountains, wildflowers. Abandoned for years before they found the daughter who owned the deed. The laboratory now named after the failed spa, Clearwater (Krauss 109).

Just as the failed spa was designed to make money on "free" land, likewise the research center is a place where Ray can "push the boundaries of science" (81).

A second related view of the American West acknowledged other inhabitants on the geographical space, but they were seen as obstacles to be feared and fought against rather than tamed and made useful: the Wild West shows performed by Bill Cody beginning in 1883 represented the West as a dangerous territory filled with savage Indians whom white Euroamerican had to fight and triumph over in order to fulfill their "Manifest Destiny" (Castor 162).

In their 20th and 21st century extension to political neo-conservative foreign policy, the ideas that Turner and Cody expressed in the 19th century are still current in the collective political imagination. Nowhere is this more obvious than in American policies of national "defense" pursued by Republicans during the Bush Administration and continued by Democrats throughout Obama's two presidential terms. With regard to 9/11, Krauss's narrative creates a room where her reader can question the mainstream media and political rhetoric, including the ways in which Turner and Cody's ideas continue to thrive in the post 9/11 American imagination. This rhetoric portrays the attacks on the World Trade Center

as forces of evil threatening American civilization not unlike the ways in which Bill Cody's Wild West shows represented Indians.

Krauss's novel, along with other recent post 9/11 art, therefore leads her readers to a different imaginative place for reflecting on 9/11 than is usually represented in the popular media and US government policies (Kenniston and Quinn 9). Among the many good examples of this fiction that hold space for historical self-scrutiny, several of the most acclaimed include Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* (2006), and Lynne Sharon Schwartz's *The Writing on the Wall* (2005) (Bjerre).

In the novel, the reader walks into a "room" that might be thought of as a figurative "Ground Zero" in several ways: first, through descriptive language located in geographical place, both New York as the context for the reader's most immediate association with Ground Zero, second in the Mojave desert of the West where much of the action unfolds, and third, in the consciousness of the main character. Samson's mind becomes a place that is both palpable and in the process of transformation. This double sense of material reality and interior psychological change is experienced viscerally by the reader through landscape imagery and a sense of real place and time.

Historically, before "Ground Zero" was used as shorthand for the site of the World Trade Center attacks, the term had already been part of the English language for over a half a century. It was first introduced in 1945 to mean "the point on the surface of the earth or water directly below, directly above, or at which an atomic or hydrogen bomb explodes" (qtd. in Stamelman 12). As mentioned above, from the moment the atomic bomb leveled Hiroshima, humans have had to reckon with the possibility of extinction. In the novel's Prologue, the reader confronts this possibility in an oblique way as we witness a 1957 explosion in the desert along with the narrator:

> And then a noise we've never heard before. Something like maximum volume. Even with our eyes closed we see a flash of hot white light from a bomb four times as big as Nagasaki, so bright there are no shadows. We count to ten and what we see is the blood coursing through

> our own veins and the skeletons of the men in front of us. The X-ray of a thousand GIs, their bones like a desert slide show. The yucca trees stand out in relief, the mountains are aluminum [...] When the silence finally settles we stand and march forward for the assault on ground zero. A thousand men, our film badges blushed scarlet, like girls who've just been kissed" (Krauss 6,7).

Krauss reminds the reader in this passage of the double sense of proximity and distance Americans have felt from the ultimate implications of being able to use an atomic weapon; on the one hand, we sense the wonder of its power to transform the men down to their very bones. On the other, with the men's "film badges blushed scarlet, like girls who've just been kissed," it is described as seductive entertainment, loaded with sexual desire that seems impossible to resist.[10] They are, after all, not launching an actual invasion of a city, but witnessing a test in the apparent empty space of the American West.

The sense of distance may or may not be an illusion for the men as individuals. As the narrator, whose identity we do not yet know, says, "The air is dark as a comic book doomsday. How can I explain that we took this personally?" (6). Although from our early 21st century perspective, the reader knows what the narrator cannot about the dangers of exposure to nuclear fallout, the first person narrator does sense it in an uncanny way with his observation. This twin sense of near and far, of danger and seduction, and of reality and illusion is repeated in several other ways in the novel, as Krauss interrupts the reader's possible seduction by the explosive power represented by Ground Zero.

In the first chapter we meet Samson Greene, the main character who is wandering in the same place where the nuclear test we witnessed in the Prologue took place, but we have moved forward to May 2000. Samson has neither the desire nor the fear of the narrator in the Prologue, but finds himself in an in-between state of confusion. The reader, likewise, is temporarily suspended in this liminal space, witnessing in the third person the voice of an omniscient narrator reporting on the event in a style that give facts of a case at the same time that it suggests the larger stories to

10 May examines the ways in which atomic power in the 1950s was associated with gendered images of women as dangerously seductive (92-113).

which this man's predicament may be connected: "When they found him he was halfway down the only stretch of asphalt that cuts through Mercury Valley. The two police officers saw him up the road, ragged as a crow" (11). Krauss's image of the crow suggests a clear but fragile edge between the human scale of order and control represented by the stretch of road cutting through the desert, and the vastness of the landscape surrounding it. This landscape is indifferent to human goals and plans.[11] The image is repeated with a variation in the novel's epilogue, narrated by Samson's wife Anna who recalls a time seven or eight months before the opening scene. Samson and Anna watch "one sturdy crow and then another land on the lawn" of the house they have rented for a weekend in upstate New York (248). In many cultures crows traditionally warn of danger and death, but at the same time they promise rebirth and transformation, and they are extremely intelligent and adaptive.[12] The range of these possibilities is suggested in the opening chapter, where whatever sturdy confidence this man as represented by a "sturdy crow" seems to have left him.

In this passage, we are situated at a figurative Ground Zero in the desert as witnesses to the confusion of this man. In the novel's Prologue, Krauss has already given us a specific 1957 post-war historical context about what may be at issue in a larger sense. At the same time, in this opening chapter, we don't know any more than the police or the man himself about what led him to the desert. In principle, then, we are open to multiple possibilities about what we will find in the figurative room of the novel's title. Likewise, as readers we do not yet know what or who we will encounter in the various geographical spaces in which events develop.

It is not the main purpose of this article to discuss Krauss's use of narrative perspective. However, a few observations will hopefully suggest

11 Elliot West analyzes the complex relationships between human and nonhuman nature in the West, complicating the discussions of Limerick and White as well as those of Turner and Cody (West xv-xxiv).

12 In Irish mythology, for example, crows are associated with the goddess of war and death, Morrigan (Leming). See Starovecka for examples from a variety of other mythologies and legends, including Welsh, Swedish, Norse, Danish, and Ukranian , Crows are central figures in many Native American mythologies, often as trickster figures restoring balance to the world. For examples of stories in Gross Ventre, Hopi, many Pueblo tribes, Ojibwe, Lenape, and Lakota, see Native American Crow Mythology. For an interesting recent discussion on crows as intelligent, and as one of the most adaptive species on the planet living in close proximity to humans, see Klein.

some of the care she takes to situate her intended readers as inhabitants of the imagined "room" of her title. The narration is focalized through Samson's perspective, but because it is told through third person narration, we meet him from a subtle critical distance. For most of the novel, we find ourselves in the room of his consciousness, but at the same time we are reminded that it is Samson's, rather than our own minds that we witness. Krauss helps us see this difference in that by contrast, the Prologue as narrated by Donald, and the Epilogue as narrated by Anna, are both told in the first person. As bookends to the novel, their voices claim the authority of having the first and last words. In addition, the difference between their points of view and Samson's is that they seem to be talking directly to us, asking us to hear particular stories they want to tell. These stories are markedly different from, although they do not necessarily contradict, the versions of them to which Samson's narration alludes.

If, how, and why we decide to believe each of the three points of view in the novel will depend on our own willingness as readers to think for ourselves, through the limitations of our own experience and knowledge. We might think of the voices of Donald in the Prologue and Anna in the Epilogue as contributing to the larger architecture of the novel as a living room where we get to know Samson well. In adjoining rooms, these two other characters who know him in different contexts than we do, "live" in the figurative room of the novel as a whole.[13] In practice, then, Krauss's room does not contain multiple possibilities in an empty imaginative space, such as the American West that Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis represented. Rather, following Limerick's attention to the politics of settlement, Krauss constructs places where her intended readers can connect events in the novel with ways of understanding historical narratives outside the text.

There is already an individual and a collective story behind the name of the main character, in the same way that 9/11 has a prehistory. The individual story is about Samson Greene, the man whom the police find and identify through piecing together the empirical evidence of his driver's license, (which they eventually confirm is not stolen), and the witness of his wife Anna who reaches the scene and takes her husband to the local hospital. Samson's disorientation, we learn, has been caused by a brain

13 Lisa Birman, iIinterview with the author, Skype, 15 May 2013.

tumor. The tumor is removed and although he survives with the critical thinking abilities of an adult intact, he loses his memory from 12 to his present age of 36; in other words, his remembered sense of self during adolescence and young adulthood has been made extinct (Birman). For the reader, this condition means that we experience the world through his eyes, but at the same time can see that the "emptiness" of his mental Ground Zero already contains stories.

One larger collective story is the Biblical story of Samson, the leader of the Israelites from the Old Testament Book of Judges. In the Biblical story, Samson is seduced by the Philistine, Delilah, who persistently tries to convince him to reveal to her the key to his great strength. Finally, he confesses that his strength is in his hair, and if his head is shaved he will lose it. Krauss's fictional Samson, as we gradually discover through the stories other people tell him about his life before the tumor, had been a successful English professor and a popular teacher. Like the Biblical character, he had kept an emotional distance from his wife Anna. We discover this only in the last few pages of the novel, in the Epilogue narrated by Anna. She recalls Samson before his illness as having "a physical remoteness like he was already receding" (248). After the operation to remove the tumor, the reader can imagine him with a shaved head, just as the Biblical Samson would have had after he lost his strength. Krauss describes his physical appearance in only one scene. His former student Lana has come to his office to visit him, and is in the process of adjusting to the changes she notices about him. She gestures toward his head and says: "'You look the same except for that'—She thrust her chin upward, gesturing at his scar. 'But as soon as you open your mouth you can tell that something's different'" (54).

This scene is significant not only because of its gesture to the Biblical story of Samson, but also because it reminds the reader that there may be other ways that Krauss gestures toward figurative scars in her narrative. At one level, the scar on Samson's head represents the subtle but real difference between his sense of self before and after the trauma of his illness. At another level, Krauss develops a sense of place in the novel as a gesture toward the ways in which American consciousness has been in a process of perhaps unconscious transformation since 1945. Just as the Biblical Samson conquered the Philistines but the Israelites had to live with the knowledge that he lost his own life in the process, so Samson's scar is a

reminder of his real losses. Americans, too, live with the unconscious scars of what Limerick calls the "legacy of conquest."

The desert is an important place where Krauss allows the reader to enter into a conscious process of transformation. This process develops as we witness the developing relationships between the main characters. Through their interactions with Samson, they enact ideas about America: Ray Malcolm, the neuroscientist, sees it as an empty landscape where he can extend the frontiers of rational knowledge about the ways in which the human brain absorbs and processes memory. As the director of a neurological study in memory transfer, he enlists Samson in an experiment to understand the effects of direct memory transfers from the brain of one person to another. The memories he looks for are about moments when, "[…] ordinary people […] had witnessed radical things, people […] had suddenly found themselves part of something greater than themselves" (Krauss 138).

Ray's ability to explain his project to Samson as he tries to persuade him to join as a research subject is shaped by the environment:

> Ray talked and he listened. The arid heat that dulled Samson's own thoughts seemed to concentrate Ray's into perfect, terse structures, purified of all excess. It was at once captivating and unnerving, the ease and grace with which he spoke (126).

The effect of the desert heat to purify is echoed in Ray's speech and his easy ability to communicate his ideas. To Samson, Ray seems both "graceful and easy, as if he had rehearsed it all before, but at the same time spontaneous" (126). Ray convinces him to be part of his project not through rational arguments, but through his ability to seduce Samson into believing that Ray understands him. On the one hand, Samson had sensed unease during their conversation when Ray had inclined his face too closely into Samson's, as if to cross an "unspoken barrier" (125). But despite his discomfort with Ray's tendency to get too close on the one hand, and to pontificate about the benefits of solitude and freedom from loneliness on the other, Samson is convinced:

> Despite everything Ray had said [about human loneliness and the illusion of falling in love, areas where Samson kept questioning Ray about], he felt the doctor understood him, and that he in turn had witnessed something like another man's mind laid bare (126).

The desert draws Ray because it seems he can both remain solitary and self-reliant in pursuit of "pure" research there, and find relief from the loneliness he remembers having since he was a child (123, 125). On the other hand, Ray is interested in exploring, as he puts it, "The possibility for *true* empathy—imagine how it would affect human relations. It's enough to keep you awake at night." Ray grinned. His teeth were perfect. "Or to send you out to the desert" (106).

Through his words and physical appearance, Ray conveys an idea that empathy can be isolated as an essence, and be expressed in as ideal form as his perfect teeth suggest. The image of his teeth, at the same time, hints of a perhaps submerged aggression that Samson seems to sense at an unspoken level. Samson senses some of this aggression, which might also speak to a basic misunderstanding on Ray's part about the way true empathy works.

On the other hand, Samson's attraction for Ray and his research is based on the way Ray makes him feel special, as if his medical condition has made him, not a person trying to recover from an illness, but "gifted" (99). What the reader sees that neither Ray nor Samson may see, is that both of these men have an intense need to find meaning through connection with other people. Samson wants to be understood and affirmed, and Ray's research, in its method, is about fusing the "radical" and likely traumatic experiences of his research subjects, not in guarding their solitude as he tries to do himself. What he doesn't seem to consider that he may become accountable for, is that these sorts of memories may affect the recipients in a number of unpredictable and possibly harmful ways.

We witness such a potential danger in the memory transfer from Donald, the ex-soldier who narrates his memory of the 1957 atomic test, to Samson. The relationship that develops between Donald and Samson provides an opportunity for the reader to witness various ways of responding to trauma. We also see how responses to trauma may change over time.

As the reader saw in the Prologue, the experience was an overwhelming one that he described as traumatic in those opening pages. When we meet him 43 years later, however, he seems not to have thought much about it. Instead his return to the site of the explosion in the desert is a place where he will soon get rich, acting out a different version of the American idea of the individual than the one Ray represents as he talks about the piece of property he owns:

> "The way I figure," said Donald, eternal lounge lizard, positioning his face in front of the air conditioner, "it's gonna be worth millions. We're talking the fastest-growing city in the country. Eventually it's gonna reach me" (114).

In spite of his undaunted optimism in the American Dream and his likability,[14] Donald's body may be a site of unconscious trauma for the memories he has been told not to talk about, and he has been trying to avoid (192). Yet even though he might lie to himself, his body doesn't lie:

> He was wearing a pair of white boxer shorts printed all over with red lipstick marks. There were elastic sock marks around his shins, the legs thin and ropy beneath the bulky girth around his middle, as if the body parts belonged to different lives (113).

Though he cannot bear to think about his memories, their effects are apparent in his appearance. Donald's character is sympathetic, though fragmented, and his body reflects the effects:

> He had a mat of hair on his chest and arms, enough for a sweater. He coughed a deep, phlegmy hack. He was in his sixties and in poor health, and Samson refrained from mentioning the obvious flaw in Donald's plan, the unlikelihood of his living to enjoy the windfall (114).

14 Donald's affable personality is a reminder of another version of the dream of success in the 20th century is popularity. To succeed, a person needs not just to work hard, but to "win friends and influence people" to use Dale Carnegie's approach in his best-selling book *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936).

Krauss's development of the relationships between Samson, Ray, and Donald suggests that she would agree with the reflections on American consciousness in the wake of 9/11 made by philosopher Walter A. Davis in *Death's Dream Kingdom.* Davis approaches the issue from a psychoanalytic perspective, noting that he takes issue with most of American psychoanalysis, which he sees as a practice that helps people adapt to capitalist society. For Davis, an inner psychological transformation is what is needed that will free the American imagination from what he sees as "the system of guarantees on which it has been based" (xvi). These "guarantees" include the assumption that the "American way" expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution will keep us safe, democratic, and free. But as 9/11's psychological and political fallout suggests, "History hurts." It hurts, he writes, because "it can become the scene of profound and irreversible changes in the collective psyche" (xviii). Davis suggests that there is no guarantee of "humanistic renewal" and that "the hard truth of history is that everything is contingent" (xviii).[15]

From a psychoanalytic perspective, we focus on the meaning of the image, and as Davis notes, "images from the present must speak to other images tied to memories buried deep in the nation's history" (4). He states: "On 9/11 did many Americans perhaps realize, if only for a moment, that we were now experiencing, in diminished form, what it was like to be in Hiroshima city on 6 August 1945 when in an instant an entire city disappeared?" (4). The question is one that Krauss's images of the atomic tests in the Mojave desert in the Prologue address as well. Davis believes that,

15 Davis's project is in part to unpack the unconscious blocks in collective thinking that prevent Americans from taking responsibility in ways that are not destructive to ourselves and to the world at this moment of "planetary" interdependence, to use Spivak's term developed in *Death of a Discipline* (73). One of the most important blocks is the reluctance to look inward at ourselves. "But what about the terrorists over there?" Davis has two responses. First, in "studying any problem, it's always best to start at home" (xviii). A good example is that we don't need to spend months trying to make sense of "distortions of Islam" in order to understand the psychological mechanisms of fundamentalism. It is here in our own country. Second, "one earns the ethical right to raise questions about another culture after one has had the decency to raise those very questions about one's own." Ideology reverses that order (xviii). It is important that Americans raise the difficult questions and trauma provides an opportunity in that in its wake, "The hidden, buried history of one's life presents itself as an awareness one can no longer escape, a self-knowledge one must now construct since that act is the only route to 'recovery'" (3).

> Historical memory must become instead (of an ideological assertion of our righteousness) the movement toward a tragic culture: one for whom memory is conscience and not hagiography; for whom the past weighs like a nightmare precisely because it has not been constituted That is the true meaning of Hiroshima. Ground zero haunts us not because we feel guilt about it but because we don't (9).

What Krauss's novel, and the work of scholars such as Davis, help us to move beyond, is the "progressive self-reification that we will remain powerless to reverse as long as we refuse to internalize what actually happened on August 6, 1945" (9).

Michelle Balaev, in *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels* (2012), adds: "[The novels in her study] express trauma through a range of values that include negative, positive, neutral, or ambiguous connotations, thereby displacing the dominant claim [represented by theorist Cathy Caruth] that attaches only a negative value to trauma" (xii). Balaev suggests that numerous American novels that include trauma as subject matter and theme use landscape imagery, as Krauss does, as a way of expressing trauma's effects on memory.[16] Krauss's development of the Mojave desert as catalyst for Samson's transformation through the trauma of his tumor, and then the trauma of the memory transfer, is a good example of how a sense of place helps the reader comprehend the main character's changing perceptions of his or her world (Balaev xi-xii).

Samson's responses to the secondary trauma of the memory transfer take the reader through his process of transformation. By extension, the changes he experiences suggest how, as Ann Kaplan observes, individual ways of dealing with trauma may be complicated, and they may change over time. In Samson's case, he tries various strategies to deal with the emotional impact of his new memory, including the ongoing effort to deny that it existed:

16 Balaev's study suggests that more research is needed to explore the relationships between landscape imagery, trauma recovery, and the multilayered relationships between human and nonhuman life as discussed by Elliot West (xxii).

> Since leaving Clearwater he'd been desperately trying to avoid all thoughts not directly related to the present moment, aware that the quick productions of memory would eventually send him crashing headlong into the one memory he wanted, more than anything, to avoid: a thousand men on the floor of the desert, blinking in dawn's light (184).

At the same time, he resolves, in a move that may remind the reader of the Biblical Samson's need to show his strength, to return to the site of his earlier trauma in the operation that removed his tumor: he decides to fight his sense of confusion and helplessness through a burst of imagined strength and with the help of Jack Daniels whisky: "It fit the new image he wished to form of himself: a force to contend with, a powerful many who would not be taken advantage of" (173). The irony is that the hospital has disposed of his tumor. This means that he cannot get it back, no matter how tough and brave he feels about breaking into the hospital (with the help of the whisky and a sidekick kid he meets at his hotel named Luke) in a mad, cops and robbers action scene that looks to the reader more like a farce than a show of real strength (173, 181). These scenes (of Samson's attempt to forget, and then his resolve to fight) give the reader some relief from the heaviness of the issues around trauma and the fluctuations of human consciousness.

They also offer the reader a chance to witness several ways that humans deal with trauma through denial and resistance. In an elliptical way, we might begin to consider how these reactions have been expressed in American history since 1945, and perhaps in more direct government policies and media reactions to 9/11. In the context of our reading in the early 21st century, 9/11 is an absent presence in the novel. At the same time, Krauss gives expression to multiple ways that humans may respond to various kinds of trauma that may be personal as well as collective.

The "quick productions of memory" the narrator mentions in the passage above already led Samson, and the reader, to an important historical connection that links the memory of the 1957 explosion he received from Donald's mind, to his own childhood memories: Samson remembers the images of Hiroshima on television, and how his mother

had tried to comfort him. At the same time, she had started talking about politics: "In the days that followed he asked her incessantly about the bomb, and though she tried to calm him, in her usual way she began to talk politics, about the arms race and the idiots in Washington and the threat of nuclear war" (166). In other words, all of his traumatic memories are connected. In Krauss's historical reworking through "textualization of the context," to use Holocaust scholar Shoshana Felman's terms, 9/11 is connected to its prehistory extending back to 1945 (Felman xv).

In this passage, Krauss allows the reader to see the prehistory of 9/11 as more than the overwhelming, personal one we might interpret it as, in the Prologue.[17] In the Prologue, we empathize with the man experiencing the blast. Here, we are able to witness, as we connect the recent collective American trauma of 11 September with a broader human vulnerability in the nuclear age. This vulnerability connects recent American experiences with a more global sense of the fragile interconnectedness of all life on the planet. Through Samson's narration of his memories of the Hiroshima pictures we also are reminded that the boundaries between personal and historical memories are often fluid, and that all of these memories are infused with emotional charge. As humans, our vulnerability in an increasingly uncertain world is perhaps equaled by our attempts to deny this knowledge. The awareness that his mother died, and that he has lost his memory of her death along with his tumor, seems to be a loss too large for Samson to integrate emotionally (Krauss 34). However, the knowledge does allow him, for the first time, to begin a necessary process of mourning. What he may be grieving are the countless everyday memories of meaningful human connection, now extinguished from his memory and therefore erased from his identity. According to Judith Butler, the ability to connect this kind of personal grief with a larger national story of loss is part of the collective cultural work that Americans need to learn how to do better in our globally interdependent world (23).

The image of hiding under the bed in Samson's mother's room may be an elliptical historical reminder of the "Duck and Cover Bert the Turtle" film of 1951. The film was part of a larger public relations campaign whose goal was to provide practical information as well as psychological reassurance to Americans during the Cold War. Set in a variety of domestic

17 Bjerre notes that a number of post-9/11 novels use domestic crisis as a metaphor for the larger national crisis (60).

and public spaces from homes to public parks to school classrooms, the campaign used films and other media images to convey a direct, though misleading message: By taking simple precautions in everyday life, one could avoid the harmful effects of a nuclear attack by the Soviet Union. ("Duck and Cover" Wessels, "Duck and Cover Bert the Turtle") [18] It is not the main focus of this article to discuss the many ways in which gendered personal politics and national politics have shaped each other throughout American history. However, I would like to emphasize that Krauss's images of Samson as a young boy are both connected to American national politics at the time, and they are placed in a domestic sphere where women's roles are visible. [19] In a larger cultural context, an especially good example of these connections is the Nixon-Khrushchev "Kitchen Debate." Nixon, as the American Vice-President, argued for the cultural superiority of the American way of life over communism on the basis of how the quality of life could be improved through home appliances such as refrigerators and ovens ("The Kitchen Debate"). Civil Defense films such as "Duck and Cover" reinforced a similar point in their use of scenes involving women and children.

In contrast to these media efforts to create a sense of identification between individuals and the American government, in Krauss's novel the

18 Krauss also uses gendered images at the beginning of the novel to portray Donald's reaction to the explosion in the desert is an aggressive expression of male sexual desire. Donald remembers: "We count to ten and what we see is the blood coursing through our own veins," and when the silence follows the explosion, it is as if the men's will to attack is honed in the aftermath of an orgasm: "When the silence finally settles we stand and march forward for the assault on ground zero. A thousand men, our film badges blushed scarlet, like girls who've just been kissed" (6-7).

19 Kenniston and Quinn observe that one of the striking patterns in post-9/11 writing has been the tension between private and public representations of the event (3). Morley considers the ways in which globalization has shifted America's relationship with the world in terms of ideas about home, personal and cultural identity, and national sovereignty. At the same time, she argues that post 9/11 literature does not signal a change in America's relationship to the world as much as it reinvents the idea that the nation's story can be represented in the domestic, small-scale stories about individuals and their families (731). Krauss makes this connection through her narration of Samson's memories of his mother at the same time trying to protect him from knowledge about the bomb, while allowing her underlying sense of uncertainty to register in his memory.

reader takes on the role of witness; the reader bears witness that involves not just empathy and motivation to help particular individuals, but a desire to connect this empathy to a deeper, multilayered understanding the structures of injustice (Kaplan 23).

For most of the novel, 9/11 and its prehistories, beginning with Hiroshima, have been a muted presence, but in the last chapter, Krauss returns us to New York in April 2002. In a short visit to the city to meet his wife (to whom he will not return) Krauss celebrates New York, not as site of Ground Zero trauma, but more as a place reminiscent of "April in Paris" with its small pleasures, a place that reflects Samson's transformed consciousness. It is a very different room from the one we walked into with him in the opening chapter. Krauss constructs memories of a city to be celebrated for its continued aliveness, aliveness that can allow for the mourning of real loss but also the small pleasures of a single moment. Samson's transformation through both his trauma of the tumor, and the traumatic transfer of Donald's memory, have produced responses that are not only negative. In contrast to the type of analysis developed by many scholars in the Humanities influenced by Caruth's approach, trauma in Krauss's narration is something that can be integrated into a history. It can be narrated. Walking down Amsterdam Avenue in the April rain, smelling the damp earth, and stopping into a small Italian restaurant, the reader knows that Samson's longing for a return to that past is not possible, and perhaps because it cannot be relived in experience, its imaginative power is that much stronger.

Ground Zero is more than a point above, below, or at which a nuclear bomb explodes in the imaginative room of *Man Walks into a Room.* Unlike the catastrophic ending to the Biblical story of Samson, the ending of Krauss's novel is a point at which a possibly deeper transformation begins for Samson Greene. His transformation is a kind of victory that does not require the ultimate self-sacrifice that the Biblical Samson's victory over the Philistines did (Krauss 204). Rather, Samson's "victory," which is also the reader's, includes a full range of emotions. This range of emotions allows for celebration of small pleasures, along with the mourning of the real loss of our illusions of innocence and independence. For Krauss's reader as witness, it includes the ability to reinvent the self, but in a way that embraces rather than escapes history.

Works Cited

Balaev, Michelle. *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels.* Chicago, IL: Northwestern UP., 2012. Print.

Birman, Lisa Interview with the author, Skype, 15 May 2013.

Bjerre, Thomas Ærvold. "American Literature after September 11" *Anglo Files.* Feb. 2009: 48-61. Print.

Burn, Stephen J. "Mapping the Syndrome Novel." *Diseases and Disorders in Contemporary Fiction: The Syndrome Syndrome* 10 (2013): 35. Print.

Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence.* New York: Verso, 2004. Print.

Carnegie, Dale. *How To Win Friends and Influence People.* 1936. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981. Print.

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996. Print.

Castor, Laura. "Photograph, Story, and Memory in Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven," Less is More: Short Fiction Theory and Analysis.* Ed. Jakob Lothe, Hans H. Skei and Per Winther. 157-67. Oslo: Novus P, 2008. Print.

Codde, Philippe. "Keeping History at Bay: Absent Presences in Three Recent Jewish American Novels." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies.* 57.4 (Winter 2011): 673-693. *Project Muse*. 2011. Web. 13 Feb. 2014.

Cvetkovitch, Ann. "Trauma Ongoing." *Trauma at Home: After 9/11.* Ed. Judith Greenberg. 60-66. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2003: 60-66. Print.

Davis, Walter A. *Death's Dream Kingdom: The American Psyche Since 9-11.* London: Pluto Press, 2006. Print.

De Grom, Babette. *Second and Third-Generation Trauma Representation: A Comparison of Thane Rosenbaum's* Second Hand Smoke *and Nicole Krauss's* Great House. Diss., U. of Ghent. 2011. Web. 28 Feb. 2014.

DeLillo, Don. *Falling Man.* New York: Scribner, 2007. Print.

Drinnon, Richard. *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building.* Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1997. Print.

"Duck and Cover Bert the Turtle Civil Defense Film." *YouTube.com*, (11 Jul.y 2009). Web. 13 Oct. 2013.

"Duck and Cover" *Wessels Living History Farm: Farming in the 1950s and 60s*. (2007). Web. 25 March 2015.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Self-Reliance." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature.* Vol.1. Shorter 7th ed. New York: Norton, 2008: 542. Print.

Etulain, Richard W. "The American West and Its Historians." *Historically Speaking.* 3.5 (Jun. 2002): 15-17. *Project Muse*. 2002. Web. 7 Feb. 2014.

Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York: Routledge, 1992. Print.

Foer, Jonathan Safran. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close.* Boston, MA: Mariner Books, 2005. Print.

Frémont, John Charles. *The Expeditions of John Charles Frémont.* Urbana: U. of Illinois P., 1973. Print.

Goldstein, Cheryl. "Every Individual Should Feel *As If*": Exilic Memory and Third Generation Holocaust Writing. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science.* 3.8. (Apr. 2013): 67-75. *Project Muse* 2013. Web. 21 Feb. 2014.

Kaplan, Ann. *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2005. Print.

Kenniston, Ann and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn, Eds. *Literature after 9/11* (Routledge Studies in Contemporary Literature). New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.

"The Kitchen Debate." *TeachingAmericanHistory.org*. (2006-15, ND). Web. 11 Oct. 2013.

Klein, Joshua. "The Amazing Intelligence of Crows." *TED Talk*, (March. 2008). Web. 11 Oct. 2013.

Krauss, Nicole. *Man Walks into a Room.* New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2003. Print.

------. *The History of Love.* London: Viking, 2005. Print.

------. *Great House.* New York: Norton, 2010. Print.

------. Interview. "We Create Who We Are." *Louisiana Channel*, 26 Dec. 2012. *YouTube*. Web. 15 Feb. 2014.

Lang, Jessica. "The History of Love, the Contemporary Reader, and the Transmission of Holocaust Memory." *Journal of Modern Literature.* 33.1 (Fall 2009): 43-56. Print.

Leming, David. "Crows and Ravens." *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology*. *Native Languages.org* (2013). Web. 11 Oct. 2013.

Levine, Peter A. *In an Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness.* Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books. 2010. Print.

Limerick, Patricia. *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West.* New York: Norton, 1987. Print.

May, Elaine Tyler. *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era.* New York: Basic Books, 1988. Print.

McInerney, Jay. *The Good Life.* New York: Knopf, 2006. Print.

McNally, Richard. *Remembering Trauma.* Cambridge, MA: Belknap P. of Harvard UP, 2003. Print.

Mitrea, Alexandra. "Narrativizing Trauma in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* and Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love*." *East-West Cultural Passage* 2 (2012): 49-60. Print.

Morley, Catherine. 'How Do We Write about This?" The Domestic and the Global in the Post-9/11 Novel." *Journal of American Studies* 45.4 (Nov. 2011): 717-731. Print.

Morrison, Toni. "Home." *The House That Race Built.* Ed. Wahneema Lubiano. New York: Pantheon Books, 1997: 3-12. Print.

"Native American Crow Mythology." *Native American Legends, Meaning, and Symbolism from the Myths of Many Tribes. NativeLanguages.org* (2013). Web. 13 Oct. 2013.

Noble, David W. *Death of a Nation: American Culture and the End of Exceptionalism.* Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2002. Print.

O'Sullivan, John. " John L. O'Sullivan on *Manifest Destiny*." 1839. *Mtholyoke. edu,* 2014. Web. 26 Feb. 2014.

Schwartz, Lynne Sharon. *The Writing on the Wall.* New York: Counterpoint, 2005. Print.

Selejan, Corina. ""The Opposite of Disappearing": Jewishness and Globality in Nicole Krauss's Novels *The History of Love* and *Great House*." *East-West Cultural Passage* 1 (2011): 87-96. Print.

Stamelman, Richard. "11 September: Between Memory and History." *Trauma at Home: After 9/11*. Ed. Judith Greenberg. Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P, 2003. 11-20. Print..

Starovecka, Zuzana. "Ravens and Crows in Mythology, Folklore and Religion," *Perspectives: The Student Magazine of the Department of British and American Studies* (30 Oct. 2010). Web. 25 .March. 2015.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Death of a Discipline*. New York: Columbia UP, 2003. Print.

Stedman, Gesa, "Brain Plots: Neuroscience and the Contemporary Novel." *Real-Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* 24 (2008): 113-124. Print.

Turner, Frederick Jackson. "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." *The Frontier in American History*. Ch.1. 1920. *Xroads. virginia,edu*, 2014. Web. 24 Feb. 2014.

West, Elliot. *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado.* Lawrence: U of Kansas P, 1998. Print.

White, Richard. *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West.* Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1991. Print.

Workman, Sarah R. *Witnessing the Past from the Postmodern Present: Intertextuality in Nicole Krauss's* The History of Love *and Anne Michael's* Fugitive Pieces. Diss. Georgetown U, 2010. Print.

Zierler, Wendy. "Connections and Collisions: Identities in Contemporary Jewish-American Women's Writing (review)." *American Jewish History*. 93.1 (Mar. 2007): 105-107. Print.