

Elegy and the Impossibility of Recovery: Trauma, Absence, and Ethical Persistence in Tracy K. Smith's Poetry

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Keywords: Elegy, Healing, Recovery, Smith, Trauma.

ABSTRACT

Objectives: This study examines the concept of recovery in Tracy K. Smith's poetry collection *Wade in the Water* through its dual meanings of healing and retrieval, asking whether her work enacts recovery by achieving healing or by rearticulating traumatic experience.

Methods: Drawing on trauma theory, particularly the works of Caruth, Eyerman, and LaCapra, the study employs qualitative textual analysis and close reading of *Wade in the Water* and *I Will Tell You the Truth About This, I Will Tell You All About It* to examine the relationship between history, trauma, memory, loss, absence, and recovery.

Results: The analysis demonstrates that Smith's poetry does not present recovery as reconciliation or closure. Instead, it reactivates historical and cultural trauma across time while distinguishing between loss and absence. By assuming the role of what Eyerman terms a "carrier group," Smith transmits collective memory and cultural trauma without resolving them.

Conclusions: The study concludes that recovery in Smith's poetry is best understood not as healing from trauma but as an ethical engagement with its enduring presence. Her poetry transforms elegy into a space of witnessing and remembrance, encouraging readers to compassion.

الرتاء واستحالة التعافي : الصدمة، والغياب، والاستمرار الاخلاقي في شعر تريسي ك. سميث

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معلومات البحث	المستخلص
تاريخ الاستلام: 25 أيار 2026	الاهداف: هذه الدراسة تهدف إلى بحث مفهوم التعافي في شعر تريسي ك. سميث من خلال دلالاته المزدوجة: الشفاء والاستعادة، متسائلة عما إذا كان شعرها يُجسد التعافي بوصفه عملية شفاء، أم يعيد صياغة التجربة الصدمية.
تاريخ القبول: 5 تموز 2026	المنهجية: تستند الدراسة إلى نظرية الصدمة، ولا سيما إسهامات كاروث وأيرمان، ولاكابر، وتعتمد المنهج التحليلي النوعي والقراءة الدقيقة لقصيدتي <i>Wade in the Water</i> و <i>I Will Tell You the Truth About This, I Will Tell You All About It</i> ؛ وذلك لتحليل العلاقة بين الصدمة والذاكرة والفقد والغياب والتعافي.
تاريخ النشر: 20 أيلول 2026	Doi: https://doi.org/10.59750/jbrhs.2026.51.1.194
البريد الإلكتروني للباحث المرسل: symboofpeace.a@gmail.com	النتائج: تكشف الدراسة أن شعر سميث لا يقدم التعافي بوصفه مصالحة أو وصولاً إلى الإغلاق، بل يعيد تنشيط الصدمة التاريخية والثقافية عبر الزمن، مع التمييز بين الفقد والغياب. كما تتخذ سميث دور ما يسميه آيرمان (الجماعة الحاملة) إذ تنقل الذاكرة الجمعية والصدمة الثقافية من دون أن تحلّهما أو تنهي أثرهما .
الكلمات المفتاحية: الاسترجاع، التعافي، الصدمة، الرتاء، سميث	الاستنتاجات: تستخلص الدراسة إلى أن التعافي في شعر سميث يُفهم على نحو أفضل بوصفه انخراطاً أخلاقياً مع استمرارية الصدمة، لا بوصفه شفاء منها .ومن ثم تقوم سميث بتوظيف شعرها النوعي إلى فضاءٍ للشهادة والتذكّر، داعية القراء الى التعاطف.

1. Introduction

Although trauma theory and the literary representation of trauma have been extensively examined in contemporary criticism, the distinction between “loss” and “absence” remains underdeveloped. Most studies focus on trauma as a response to identifiable historical loss, giving limited attention to absence as a continuous structural condition which resists recovery and closure. Tracy K. Smith transforms elegy from a poetic mode traditionally associated with personal losses into a mode speaks of wider racial and political issues. She also challenges traditional elegy as a mode that tends to reconcile loss, into a mode of persistent mourning and unresolved absence which recovers histories and rearticulates trauma. By applying a cluster of concepts to contemporary African American poetry, this study contributes to trauma theory and contemporary elegiac trends.

This paper will investigate how Tracy K. Smith’s poetry collection *Wade in the Water* enact a process of recovery, examining the archival and historical stances within her composition. Additionally, it will discuss how Smith’s poetry collection *Wade in the Water* engage with trauma that is not directly experienced by the poet, but is mediated through family experiences or collective historical memory, and the questions that mediation raise about representation, authenticity, and the transmission of trauma. Moreover, it will investigate Smith’s archival-historical poems function as an act of recovering traumatic histories within the context of culturally persistent trauma and absence.

Literature Review

Recent scholarship on Tracy K. Smith has focused on trauma, race and ecological consciousness in her poetry. However, limited attention has been given to the failure of consolation in her elegiac poetry. Conventional elegy moves from grief toward reconciliation. In contrast, Smith’s poetry frequently resists closure and sustains mourning through the recovering of traumatic histories.

According to Peter Sacks (1985), conventional elegy seeks symbolic recovery through mourning, whereas Jahan Ramazani (1994) argues that modern elegy increasingly rejects consolation and preserves unresolved grief. Smith’s poetry aligns with this anti-consolatory tradition because her poems mourn collective trauma rather than individual loss.

Smith’s disjointed relationship with nature is also discussed by scholars. Unlike Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth who portray nature as restorative. Smith presents nature through estrangement and instability. Ecocritical readings of her poetry suggest that environmental and cosmic imagery emphasize alienation rather than transcendence (Hoelzer, 2022). *Life on Mars*, the title of one of her collections, carries what Dan Chiasson describes as a racially charged resonance which links cosmic distance to racial and cultural displacement.

The African American spiritual “Wade in the Water”, from which the title poem derives, embodies two interconnected traditions. On the one hand, the spiritual functioned as a coded form of resistance, offering African-Americans directions for escape and survival. On the other hand, it also expressed Christian faith and hope, providing spiritual consolation amid suffering. Smith’s engagement with this tradition contains both impulses. Nevertheless, her poem foregrounds the

resistant and historical dimensions of the spiritual while deliberately subordinating its consolatory function.

Additionally, scholars connect Smith's poetry to persistent racial violence, incarceration, and institutional inequality. In *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), Sharpe uses the metaphor of the ship's wake to describe how the afterlives of slavery continue to structure Black existence in the present. This perspective is relevant to Smith's poetry, the elegiac voice repeatedly returns to unresolved historical suffering and its contemporary manifestations

Trauma in literary Studies: a Theoretical Background

A clear theoretical understanding of trauma within contemporary literary studies can be developed through the work of Cathy Caruth. She builds on and revises the concepts of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic model into a post-Freudian framework. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Caruth defines trauma as an event not fully grasped at the moment of its occurrence but as an act registered belatedly. Trauma in this sense, is structured by latency which emerges as a response to an overwhelming event that is not experienced clearly as it happens first, but returns later through repetition or emotional disturbance. Moreover, her take on trauma is indirect and resistant to immediate recognition.

This idea is illustrated through the story of Tancred and Clorinda in *Jerusalem Delivered* by Torquato Tasso. Tancred in the story unknowingly kills Clorinda in battle. However, the trauma does not fully affect him at the exact moment. It haunts him later when he hears Clorinda's voice coming from a tree; this moment of hearing is what shocks him. Caruth uses this example to show that trauma can come from indirect experience, such as hearing or encountering the voice of someone who is suffering, rather than the direct experience of the event only. Such a formulation opens trauma theory to forms of indirect experience in which subjects become traumatized through events they did not directly live through.

This emphasis on mediation and indirect experience is more extended in the framework of Ron Eyerman. In *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (2001). Eyerman introduces two different instances of trauma, one affects individuals separately, while the other one is a process which affects people collectively; these people usually have cultural trauma in common. Through this lens, trauma is read as a collective and culturally formulated process, rather than a purely individual psychological event. Cultural trauma does not depend on direct experience, but it is produced and transmitted through narratives, representations, and what Eyerman terms as "carrier groups" that mediate historical memory. In this sense, trauma of slavery does not persist as a lived memory for all individuals, but as a foundational narrative that is continually reconstructed through cultural forms, including literature.

Together, Caruth and Eyerman agree on a crucial point which is the operation of trauma through mediation, belatedness, and indirect transmission. This blend is methodologically productive in that it allows trauma to be understood as an instance, continuously rearticulated through representational practices. Within this understanding, Smith poetry emerges as a privileged

medium which does not merely reflect trauma, but actively participates in its transmission and reconstruction.

The framework is further clarified through the combining of Dominick LaCapra's views, upon which his distinction between loss and absence provides a critical lens for addressing the limits of representation. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), LaCapra defines loss as a concrete, historically identifiable event that can be narrated and mourned, whereas absence is structural, transhistorical, and not reducible to a specific occurrence. Absence resists closure and cannot be fully recovered or "worked through" in the same way as loss.

Within trauma theory, Dominick LaCapra conceptualizes absence as a transhistorical condition that is not anchored to any specific temporal moment whether past, present, or future. This distinguishes it from loss which refers to concrete historical events that can be in principle narrated and mourned. LaCapra warns that collapsing this distinction risks transforming historically specific catastrophes, such as, the Holocaust or Apartheid into abstract structural conditions effacing their historical and ethical specificity.

LaCapra's model leaves open an important question regarding the constancy of trauma: to what extent do such events persist in shaping subjectivity beyond their historical occurrence? This study extends LaCapra's framework by arguing that trauma, when repeatedly mediated through representation, memory, and cultural forms, does not remain confined to its original historical moment. Instead, it undergoes a process of reactivation that aligns with models of cultural trauma upon which past events continue to structure both individual and collective experience.

In this sense, the repeated witnessing and rearticulation of traumatic histories produce a temporally complex form of absence that operates in two directions, retrospectively and prospectively. As it remains oriented toward an unresolved past that cannot be fully integrated or worked through, it reproduces its effects in the present and future through ongoing acts of mediation. Smith's poetry exhibits a new pathway of absence which digresses from the LaCaprian understanding in that it does not collapse loss into absence, but indicate that historically grounded trauma may extend its impact across time without losing its connection to specific events.

Thus, absence emerges as a matter of what has been traumatizing, and as an ongoing process of engagement with that trauma. This continuous process binds individuals and communities through shared understanding and shared fate. In this sense, trauma is neither fully containable within history nor reducible to abstraction. It persists as a mediated and temporally extended condition that complicates the boundary between past experience and present consciousness.

Synthesizing all the previous arguments provides an integrated framework upon which LaCapra's distinction between loss and absence clarifies the persistence of trauma across individual and collective dimensions. Caruth explains the belated structure of traumatic experience, while Eyerman accounts for its cultural mediation and transmission. By combining them altogether, these approaches form a coherent analytical framework in which trauma is understood as mediated, temporally deferred, and structurally persistent.

Within this theoretical cluster, Smith's poetry can be read as a form of mediated or secondary witnessing. Thus, the subject does not directly experience the original event but becomes involved through acts of representations, whether they are political, social or personal. In this sense, her poetry engages with cultural trauma in Eyerman's sense by reactivating histories of slavery, racial violence, and systemic injustice through narrative and lyrical forms, and by acting as a participant in the "Carrier Groups". At the same time, it reflects Caruth's model of belatedness, as these histories do not emerge as immediate experiences but as echoes, fragments, and voices that return to the poet retrospectively.

Moreover, Smith works also stage what Dominick LaCapra terms culturally persistent trauma. Through her poetry, she foreshadows the structural dimensions of the cultural trauma she confronts, emphasizing that this trauma is not a transient experience that can be easily overcome or recovered through what LaCapra calls "working through." Rather than seeking to close or resolve this structural absence, her poetry continually rearticulates it, revealing its character as a deep cultural wound and a historical rupture that resists closure. Her work does not fully "work through" trauma in a healable or redemptive manner, but it sustains a mode of critical engagement that acknowledges and inhabits structural voids effectively learning to "live with" them. By doing so, Smith avoids abstracting historically specific events into generalized traumas upon through which she returns to these events and relives them, in order to expose how absence persists across time both retrospectively and prospectively.

Through different strategies, Tracy K. Smith's poetry does not simply represent loss, but it exposes the limits of representation. Through textual gaps, archival letters, and songs, she signals what has been lost, what cannot be fully recovered or worked through. In this sense, her poetry resists closure, or consolation while enables forms of mourning and critical engagement. Her poetry does not resolve the conditions of historical injustice that constantly shape the present.

Thus, Smith's poetry may be understood as an instance where cultural trauma is transmitted through indirect experience, while simultaneously revealing the persistence of absence. Her poetry is traumatic because it offers direct testimony of violence. Moreover, it stages the belated encounter with histories that remain unresolved. By maintaining the tension between representation and its limits, Smith's poetry enacts trauma as an ongoing experience which resists final consolation and continues to reverberate across time.

2. Methodology

The research is qualitative as it depends on interpretive and analytical readings of texts rather than statistical measurement. The paper will investigate two archival-historical poems of Smith's collection *Wade in the Water*, the title poem, *Wade in the Water* and *I Will Tell You the Truth About This, I Will Tell You All About It* to examine the relationship between history and trauma persistence across time. Any reference to quantitative dimensions is therefore limited to the structured organization of qualitative findings rather than numerical or experimental analysis.

Moreover, the study employs LaCapra's historiographical framework, arguing that Smith's poetry collection method preserves historical evidence and interrogates dominant narratives, transforming archival materials into aesthetic sites of remembrance and critique. Additionally, the selection of these two poems, compared to her personal lament upon her parents, provide an important lens for understanding Smith's engagement with wider issues, such as, trauma, absence, and structural persistence within these historical events.

The paper is based primarily on close readings of a range of scholarly works on elegiac poetry, as well as critical engagement with both Smith's fiction and non-fiction texts. It does not rely on clinical experimentation or cognitive studies, such as cause and effect methodologies. Nor does it draw on empirical or laboratory-based psychological data. Its analytical framework is grounded entirely in textual and historical evidence.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. Transmission of Trauma

The legacy of slavery in the United States operates not only as a historical event but as an enduring structure that continues to shape African American experience on its social, political, and cultural levels prospectively and retrospectively. As Ron Eyerman argues, cultural trauma does not depend on direct experience; rather, it emerges through mediated processes of representation, collective memory, and identity formation (Eyerman, 2001). In this sense, the trauma of slavery exceeds its temporal boundaries which make it function as a constitutive element in the ongoing construction of African American identity. However, this transmission should not be understood as passive inheritance. Instead, it is actively reconstituted through contemporary conditions that reproduce rather than resolve the logic of historical subjugation.

Within this framework, trauma must be approached retrospectively and prospectively. The subject does not simply inherit the past but encounters it through the pressures of the present and the burden of the anticipated future. Persistent racial inequality, institutional discrimination, and the visibility of anti-Black violence operate as a reminder that reactivates historical memory which produces a form of delayed recognition. This process aligns with Cathy Caruth's formulation of trauma as belated, emerging not in the moment of the event but through a deferred confrontation with its meaning. In the African American context, this belatedness is not purely temporal but structural. Through such belatedness, the past is uncovered as it continues to manifest in the present.

The awakening of collective cultural trauma requires careful qualification. It cannot be reduced to a generalized form of empathy, as such a formulation risks abstracting historical specificity into mere emotional response. Awakening should be understood as a critical recognition of the persistence of historical structures within contemporary reality. In his detailed observation of the transmission of cultural trauma Eyerman (2001) notices that , "The notion of cultural trauma implies that direct experience of an event is not a necessary condition for its inclusion in the trauma

process. It is through time-delayed and negotiated recollection that cultural trauma is experienced, a process which places representation in a key role” (p. 12).

This recognition is produced through repeated encounters with inequality that destabilize narratives of progress and resolution. Thus, trauma is not simply remembered, but re-experienced through the structural repetition of its conditions. The trauma in question is not merely psychological or individual. It is dramatic in scope which affects and destabilizes the social fabric. Unlike psychological trauma, which is experienced on a personal level, cultural trauma operates as a shared historical experience. It becomes a form of representation and retrospective reconstruction of an event that has profoundly affected a group united by a common history.

The post-Civil Rights era has often been framed through narratives of racial progress, which have not eliminated structural disparities, highlighting them instead. According to many commentators, Barack Obama's presidency was celebrated as a declaration of a post-racial America. However, it coincided with increasing tension and systemic inequality. The Public discourses revealed growing dissatisfaction among African Americans, regarding policing, incarceration, and economic disparities. Moreover, the emergence of movements such as Black Lives Matter revealed the persistence of racial violence which undermines claims that historical injustice has been resolved.

According to Tracy K. Smith, during an interview on The New Yorker Radio Hour, the national conversation had become characterized by “a really awful sense of division” and “shrill railing against one another based on our differing perspectives” (Smith, 2019). This statement reveals Smith’s concern with the increasing fragmentation and polarization of American society during Donald Trump’s presidency. These political and social tensions reproduce a structural analogy through which the legacy of slavery becomes legible in the present.

“Grief persists as long as a void remains to be filled” (Harris, 2023, p. 4). It is within this sociopolitical context that Smith’s work must be situated. Her poetry does not approach slavery and inequality as a closed historical subject but engage with them as an ongoing condition whose effects remain materially and psychologically active. The significance of her work lies in its capacity to register how contemporary Black experience is shaped by forces that exceed individual experience which links personal perception to broader historical structures. By doing so, her writing exemplifies the mechanism of a cultural trauma transmitted through persistent socio-political inequality, generating a recognition, which is then mediated through poetic form.

This mediation becomes most explicit in *Wade in the Water*, where Smith develops a method of archival engagement that foregrounds the limits of historical representation. Drawing on Civil War era documents, including letters written by African American soldiers, the poems that she compose, do not present the past as stable or recoverable. The poems are fragmented, rearranged, and partially obscured, a practice that produces a textual field upon which meaning emerges through discontinuity. In this sense, she tries to restore suppressed voices that reveal the structural limitations embedded within the original text.

The significance of this strategy lies in its refusal to transform trauma into a fully recoverable object. Smith foreshadows the impossibility of such act. The past is encountered retrospectively

through fragments that resist totalization. This resistance produces a form of absence that is structurally embedded within the text. Such absence does not signify simple loss, but it indicates a condition in which historical experience was never fully accessible or representable within existing frameworks.

This condition extends beyond the archive into the domain of personal memory. The engagement with her family history demonstrates how cultural trauma is transmitted through personal structures where individual experience intersects with broader historical forces. The death of Smith's parents introduces a dimension of personal loss which is inseparable from the socio-historical conditions that shaped their lives. Her mother's experience within a context of racial terror, segregation, and horrors of the KKK manifest in behaviors that reflect a complex and unresolved relationship to that history.

Such moments illustrate that cultural trauma is transmitted through coherent lineal narratives, and through fragmented contradictory practices. Similarly, Smith's representation of her father reflects the limits of narrative coherence. His life was marked by both professional achievement and exposure to systemic racism that embodies the tension between inclusion and exclusion which defines the post-civil rights African American experience. The attempt to represent this life does not yield a unified account but reveals the constraints under which it must be understood.

Furthermore, trauma is not solely associated with events. As Smith explains, trauma existed in the very place they lived in, "For my parents and their kin, born into a nation intent upon their diminishment and inured to their dying" (Smith, 2020, p. 9). The very place they wished to consider a source of safety and comfort for their children turned into a psychological torment. Una Chaudhuri introduces the concept of geopathology to describe the psychological and emotional disturbances produced through dislocation, environmental estrangement, and troubled relationships with place. The term explores how individuals experience alienation, trauma, and a fractured sense of belonging within particular spatial and ecological conditions (Chaudhuri, 1995).

All of the personal, political, and social events were working together to awake Smith's sense of belonging to a particular group and then, to establish a collective identity which links her to that group. The inability to fully access or represent the experiences of her parents or her race reflects a historical condition in which Black lives have been systematically constrained within both the archive and public memory. What emerges is the recognition of an incomplete historical record. This incompleteness indicates that such wholeness was never fully available. Thus, absence becomes a defining condition of both personal and collective experience.

Smith poetic practice can be understood as an ethical duty that uncovers the limitations of historical narratives, rather than an attempt to be overwhelmed by them. Her work does not resolve the tensions between past and present, loss and absence, or personal and collective memory. Smith allows her poems to recover history through aesthetic representations that serve as an attempt for the African-Americans to remain visible. Through this approach, her poetry gives form to a trauma that is not fully accessible yet persistently operative, a trauma produced not only by historical events, but by the ongoing conditions that resist resolution.

3.2. The Struggle for Representation: Mediation Politics

Historically, earlier literary and cultural representations portrayed African individuals under colonialism and slavery as systematically deprived of voice, agency, and humanity. This historical marginalization led Tracy K. Smith to engage her poetry with archival materials, through which she seeks to recover and re-present suppressed histories. Africans were frequently depicted through dehumanizing stereotypes, often associated with images of “savages” or “primitive beings” in need of civilization. Such representations contributed to a profound cultural and historical trauma that developed into a form of collective trauma within African and African American experience.

This trauma was intensified by forced displacement, the loss of homeland, and the reduction of human beings to commodities within the transatlantic slave trade. In this context, the issue of representation becomes seminal which raise questions of how African and African American subjects are portrayed, and how such portrayals mediate the transmission of cultural trauma across generations.

The silencing and marginalization of African voices have reinforced such representations which contributes to the systemic dehumanization of African subjects and the denial of their autonomy and right to self-expression. Ultimately, these narratives operate at a deeper ideological level to justify slavery and the colonial occupation of African territories. “The prevailing ideology of nineteenth-century imperialism exploits the idea of African inferiority as a justification for European dominance” (Hammond & Jablow, 1960, p. 8).

In relation to Smith’s collection of poetry, *Wade in the Water*, the study addresses the problem of mediated trauma which unfolds how experiences of enslavement and racial violence are transmitted to a poet who did not directly experience slavery. The focus is therefore not on lived experience alone, but on inherited historical and cultural memory. Moreover, how such memory is recovered and reactivated through poetic form.

“ The struggle for representation” (Klotman and Cutler 1999) is a complex and deeply entangled issue in African American history. In his work, Eyreman discusses several forms of historical and representational struggles experienced by Black communities. Among these is the aesthetic representation, which concerned with the ways of how African American subjects are depicted within literary and visual culture. Moreover, the political representation also intensifies and reflects how such representations are not symbolic but also embedded in systems of political power and historical enforcement that shape the lived conditions of Black communities.

At the level of literature and poetry, traditional literary production is inherently politicized, in the regard that it functions as a medium which connects the individual to the political, social, and economic dimensions of the historical period in which it is produced. In this sense, and in line with the present study focus on representation through literature, particularly poetry, it is evident that literary production across different historical periods has often been implicated in colonial ideologies.

From the era of Shakespeare to Rudyard Kipling and extending into the early twenty-first century, many canonical literary figures have directly or indirectly reinforced colonial perceptions of Africans. For instance, Kipling's poem "*The White Man's Burden*" which articulates colonial subjects in explicitly dehumanizing terms, describing them as "half devil and half child" and as "lesser breeds without the law."

Within this context, Kipling is seen as promoting an ideology that legitimizes imperial domination and reinforces stereotypical representations that strip Africans of their humanity. Similarly, Shakespeare who often considered as one of the greatest composers in literary history, has been read within some critical traditions as participating in early modern constructions of racial and colonial otherness upon through which non-European figures are frequently associated with servitude, monstrosity, or marginality, and are often deprived of autonomous voice.

This representational tradition extends beyond literature into visual and performative culture. The paintings of the Nineteenth-century frequently depict the image of the "happy slave," presenting enslaved Africans as joyful in conditions of forced labor. Certain songs and cultural expressions nostalgically evoke or idealize the era of slavery which contribute to its normalization. Eyerman evokes that "White artists produced paintings that reinforced beliefs about the 'happy slave,' contented in his/her servitude" (Eyerman, 2001, pp. 15–16).

In addition, Black subjects were often denied the right to represent themselves, as evidenced by practices such as blackface performance in European and American theatre, where white actors darkened their skin and mocked African speech patterns and mannerisms. "black-faced white actors parodied black dialect and behavior in staged performances." (ibid)

In relation to Smith, her poetic style in *Wade in the Water* has consistently sought to provide space for marginalized and oppressed voices, allowing them to assume the position of (speaker) within her poems. This trajectory culminates in works such as '*Wade in the Water*' and '*I Will Tell You The Truth*' where she attempts to expose the forms of oppression and systemic injustice experienced by African Americans whose voices were historically silenced, marginalized, and rendered peripheral within dominant social and historical narratives.

Through her archival-historical poems, Smith mourns past and contemporary injustices, while foregrounding the struggle of African Americans to attain legal and social equality rather than being confined to the margins of representation. In addition, her poetics seeks to reveal structural forms of violence embedded within institutional and archival systems that actively exclude and marginalize Black subjects of such eras whom were having a struggle of representation.

In conclusion, Smith's poetry suggests an operation that goes beyond individual expression which functions as a cultural mediator that transmits and rearticulates the historical experience of African Americans, particularly the legacies of slavery, segregation, and ongoing marginalization. Her role can be understood through the concept of "carrier groups" proposed by Ron Eyerman that is, individuals or collectives who assume responsibility for conveying and reshaping cultural trauma through various forms of representation.

From this perspective, her poetry does not treat the past as a closed or completed event. She engages it in an ongoing process of representation, making it present and active within contemporary consciousness. Through this approach, Smith insists on keeping this painful histories open to reinterpretation, recognizing it as a structural ongoing process of the African American collective experience. Her poetry becomes a space in which cultural trauma is mediated through aesthetic form, while its tension and persistence are preserved rather than resolved.

3.3. Close reading of *Wade in the Water*

“Wade in the Water” is the title poem of Tracy K. Smith’s collection *Wade in the Water*. The poem refers to the African American spiritual “Wade in the Water,” a song deeply embedded in the historical and religious imagination of enslaved communities. These spirituals, often rooted in Biblical narratives and sacred figures function as expressions of faith, coded communication, and collective resistance.

Scholars of African American music and folklore have noted that such spirituals were not merely devotional hymns but also instruments of survival. The song “Wade in the Water “ has been associated with the operations of the Underground Railroad, the hidden network that aided enslaved people in their escape from slaveholders. According to historical accounts, Harriet Tubman who led dozens of enslaved individuals to freedom used spirituals as coded signals. It is believed that this song was used to instruct fugitives to move through water in order to prevent tracking dogs from detecting their scent. As musicologist, Arthur C. Jones argues that abolitionists and enslaved communities often repurposed existing sacred songs, transforming them into covert tools of resistance. In this way, spirituals operated on multiple registers. They sustained religious hope while simultaneously enabling political action. ((Jones, 1993).

For the poet, this spiritual song is what Du Bois described as African America’s “greatest gift” and the “singular spiritual heritage of the nation” (Du Bois, 1903). They become an archive of trauma and a testament to resilience. The poet recalls the violent history endured by her ancestors, and also celebrates art’s capacity to guide individuals through suffering. By blinding the contemporary moment with ancestral memory, Smith demonstrates how historical trauma persists in cultural consciousness while emphasizing the sustaining power of artistic expression.

Her poem “Wade in the Water,” recovers the historical resonance of the African American spiritual as a living structure through which trauma is transmitted. Rather than recounting slavery directly, the poem enacts what is described as belated experience in which trauma emerges indirectly to affect the speaker and the listener simultaneously. This is evident from the opening scene upon which the speaker encounters a ring shout and listens to the repeated phrase “I love you.” Although the chant is presumably comforting, it does not give comfort, as it instead generates “a terrible new ache.” The effect precedes explanation. In Caruthian terms, this moment marks the arrival of trauma through listening. The speaker is not witnessing violence, but s/he is overwhelmed by an emotion that exceeds the present moment.

The repetition of “I love you” is central to this process after it loses its status as a private declaration and becomes a communal utterance. This phrase heightens the historical burden upon the speaker’s shoulder. “I love you” presents a moment of romance or even an intimate act. However, in this sense, it becomes an ethical responsibility for the speaker to be a mediator who reflects on culturally persistent trauma which repeats itself prospectively and retrospectively. The repetition does not stabilize meaning, it intensifies ambiguity. Love becomes inseparable from historical burden. The speaker’s response as an ache rather than reassurance signals that this love carries with it an inherited past. The poem transforms a seemingly intimate phrase into a vehicle of collective memory which demonstrates how trauma is mediated.

The poem then shifts from the immediacy of the present performance to the historical imagery of slavery. The speaker declares love even for the “rusted iron chain someone was made to drag,” and for the water “where they pretended to wade.” These images are not narrativized. They appear as fragments which interrupts the present-tense scene. This formal disruption reflects the belated return to history, where the past intrudes upon the present without transition or resolution. The reference to water gestures toward strategies of escape, yet the phrasing “pretended to wade” introduces ambiguity, suggesting both survival and vulnerability.

Smith’s use of form becomes even more pronounced in the poem’s final sequence: “wood, dogs, tree, gun, girl, run.” The absence of verbs collapses action into a series of discrete, paratactic units. This syntactic compression eliminates narrative continuity, producing a structure that mirrors fear and horror. This cluster of words have its association with the haunting of the enslaved individuals, for Smith, “run” suggests a cultural trauma that was persistent to her race. Slavery is their shared fate which is, according to Eyerman (2001), as a form of cultural trauma, “harms not only the people who experienced it, but also those who have a common fate” (p. 14). For African Americans this common fate rearticulates itself constantly retrospectively and prospectively.

The image of the “girl” in the poem may stand for a contemporary African Americans who constantly experience racialized violence and institutional oppression in the United States. This image does not recall the historical trauma of slavery only, but also its ongoing reverberations within modern systems of policing and racial inequality. This interpretation is emphasized by contemporary discussions of systemic racism. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) argues that the American criminal justice system continues to be shaped by “biased policing and unfair judicial precedents” rooted in anti-Black racism, producing lasting emotional, psychological, physical, and economic consequences for Black communities (NAACP, n.d.). Smith’s poetic representation extends beyond historical remembrance which suggests that the traumatic structures associated with slavery and racial persecution continue to manifest within contemporary institutional practices. The figure of the “girl” becomes emblematic of the persistence of cultural trauma across generations which links the historical violence of enslavement with present experiences of systemic injustice.

Rather than describing an event, the poem presents a field of association that features violence, pursuit, fear, without resolution through various ways of representation, and fragmentation of

cultural traumatic memory. This aligns with Dominick LaCapra's concept of absence which cannot be fully articulated or worked through. The poem resists closure as its language breaks down into fragments that refuse to cohere into a complete account.

The final question, "Is this love the trouble you promised?" redefines the earlier repetition of "I love you." Love is no longer a source of comfort after it becomes an ethical demand. To love, in this context, is to remain accountable to a history that cannot be resolved, to act like a mediator of this history. The question does not seek an answer, but it sustains tension. This unresolved structure reinforces the poem's central dynamic. Trauma, in this sense, cannot be fully known or healed, but it persists through repetition, and cultural transmission.

Smith's poem enacts trauma as an ongoing process. Dominick LaCapra (2001) stresses that "absence is transhistorical" (p. 126). It does not unfold, it has no past, present, or future. The speaker becomes a site of mediated witnessing, experiencing a history which she did not directly live and cannot escape. Spirituals in this sense, do not function as a mere historical reference, but as a living archive through which collective trauma is continually reactivated. It sustains trauma as culturally transmitted and structurally unresolved, refusing the possibility of closure or consolation while insisting on the necessity of recovering these traumatic events.

In conclusion "Wade in the Water" may be read as a celebration of a culture that resists subjugation to the structures imposed by others. It also works as maintaining power of art in moments of historical suffering and uncertainty. The poem foreshadows art's capability in guiding individuals and communities through experiences of violence, displacement, and oppression. At the same time, "Wade in The Water", functions as an elegy which recovers the African American history, preserving memories that continue to shape collective consciousness in the present.

This emphasis on recovering these African American history is closely related to Smith's understanding of the poem. In an interview with PBS, Tracy K. Smith describes her collection *Wade in the Water* as being concerned with "compassion". Indeed, the title poem is an invitation that extends compassion beyond sympathy which urge readers to engage emotionally and ethically with historical sufferings. Thus, Smith encourages an effective encounter with the past by acknowledging these traumatic historical events, and recognizing their persistence within contemporary social and cultural life.

3.4. Close reading of "I Will Tell You the Truth About This, I Will Tell You All About It"

Tracy K. Smith's "*I Will Tell You the Truth About This, I Will Tell You All About It*" also from *Wade in the Water* is constructed from archival letters written by Black Civil War soldiers and their families. In these letters, many plead for freedom, financial assistance, reunion with loved ones, or recognition from the American state. Smith deliberately preserves the original spelling irregularities of the letters, allowing the historical voices to remain formally present within the poem. This formal decision is crucial because it positions the poem within what LaCapra (2001) calls "empathetic unsettlement" rather than appropriative identification. Smith does not attempt to

speak as the historical subjects. She creates a textual space in which their voices remain distinct, fragmented, and resistant to complete assimilation.

Smith carefully constructs the poem in a manner that preserves the authenticity of the historical voices, and avoids the appropriation of enslaved individuals. She did not speak on behalf of the victims, a matter that allows their testimonies to remain historically grounded. Through this strategy, the poem aligns with what LaCapra terms “empathetic unsettlement,” where the secondary witness engages emotionally with trauma without collapsing the distinction between self and other.

The poem challenges the American narrative which presents the Civil War as a liberation project to free enslaved people. By foreshadowing the lived experiences of African Americans, Smith complicates this historical interpretation. Slavery was legally abolished during the civil war, but conditions of marginalization and dispossession continued as reported in the letters on which the poem is built. The gap between official narratives of liberation and the persistence of racial inequality is exposed throughout the poem.

Additionally, through her detail-oriented, historically attentive representation, Smith gives voice to oppressed and marginalized African Americans. Tracy K. Smith seeks to critique what Dominick LaCapra describes as “settling accounts” and the “what aboutism” which attempt to neutralize historical violence through the balancing of accounts or moral resolution. Within dominant American discourse, the suffering of African Americans under slavery is often countered by references to the sacrifices made during the Civil War for the abolition of slavery, as though these sacrifices resolved or redeemed the violence of slavery itself.

Smith’s poetry resists this logic of historical closure. Through the representation of the testimonies and the experiences of African Americans. She exposes the inadequacy of narratives, which are the same narratives, framing emancipation as the end of racial oppression. The poem reveals the persistence of trauma, marginalization, and structural inequality beyond the formal abolition of slavery. By doing so, Smith destabilizes official historical narratives, rejecting historical closure or consolation, and invites readers to question inherited narratives of history through the recovery of these narratives.

This critical impulse is reflected in Smith’s own understanding of the collection. As she stated, “You want a poem to unsettle something, there’s a deep and interesting kind of troubling that poems do, which is to say: ‘This is what you think you’re certain of, and I’m going to show you how that’s not enough. There’s something more that might be even more rewarding if you’re willing to let go of what you already know’” (Smith, 2018) . In this sense, the poem functions as a form of ethical and political interrogation which questions dominant versions of the American past.

Smith attempts to transmit historical truth in a manner that minimizes doubt regarding the authenticity of these testimonies and claims. She deliberately preserves the original language and

spelling errors found in the archival letters, such as, “abraham lincon, subport, blossaming, and colard” (Smith, 2018, pp. 52-53). This preservation allows the voice of the writer to appear in their unaltered form. The stylistic decision transforms from mere aesthetic, into an ethical and historical strategy that strengthens the authenticity of the testimonies. These linguistic irregularities reduce the distance between the reader and the historical subjects. The spelling mistakes and fragmented expressions become evidence of the systemic deprivation experienced by African Americans under slavery, and the lack of education and illiteracy become explicit. In this sense, the forms of the letters illustrate structures of oppression that shaped the lives of their writers.

The preservation of these voices in smith’s poetics points to the continuation of racial inequality which goes beyond emancipation. The historical suffering represented in the letters cannot be isolated from the post-emancipation realities of segregation, Jim Crow laws, and the institutional discrimination faced by African Americans in the United States. The poem resists narratives portraying liberation as a complete historical resolution, which emphasizes the persistence of marginalization and racial injustice.

The speaker in the poem refers to her two sons who served in the war and notes that one of them had been wounded twice while the other continued to serve. This detail complicates the dominant white American narrative that presents figures such as Abraham Lincoln or white Americans as the heroes of the liberation of African Americans. Smith implicates this narrative, by mirroring African Americans as active participants in securing liberation through their own suffering and military service.

The speaker’s reference to her son serving in “the eight rigmat colard troops” (Smith, 2018, p. 53) functions as a critique of the racial structures embedded within the Army. If African Americans were supposedly liberated and recognized as equal participants in the struggle for freedom, the poem asks why they remained segregated within separate military divisions? The existence of the “colard” regiment exposes the contradiction of the liberatory narrative. The poem stresses that emancipation did not erase racial hierarchy, but it coexisted with institutional practices that persistently mark Black individuals distinct from white Americans.

Ultimately, “*I Will Tell You the Truth About This, I Will Tell You All About It*” functions as an elegy that critiques historical closure and consolation while simultaneously mourns persistent voids in the lives of the African Americans. The poem aligns with what Eyrman terms as “The Carrier Group”, intellectuals and artists responsible for the representation of the black experience. Through archival recovery of the testimony, Smith creates a poetic form that remains ethically attentive to the voices of the past without appropriating them, allowing trauma to appear as both historically specific and persistent.

4. Conclusion

One of the key findings of this research is that trauma within the poetry of Smith operates through indirect transmission rather than direct experience alone. Through the Caruthian understanding of trauma as belated and mediated, this study demonstrates that Smith becomes connected to the trauma prospectively and retrospectively through archival recovery, familial experience, and contemporary social realities.

Thus, Trauma reaches Smith not because she directly experienced slavery itself, but because the structural conditions and historical consequences of slavery continue to manifest within African American social and cultural life. The past in this sense is not confined to a completed historical moments, It returns through recurring forms. Trauma in Smith's work emerges as structurally persistent rather than historically concluded.

Within this framework, Smith's poetic role aligns closely with what Eyerman terms as the "carrier group," arguing that cultural trauma survives through individuals and artistic communities that mediate and transmit collective memory (Eyerman, 2001, p. 3). Smith's poetry performs precisely this function, as she assumes the role of a cultural mediator who rearticulates African American historical experience within contemporary consciousness. Her poetry does not merely describe trauma, but actively participates in its transmission by preserving voices that dominant historical narratives attempted to consider peripheral.

This function becomes particularly visible in "Wade in the Water" and "I Will Tell You the Truth About This, I Will Tell You All About It." Both poems may be understood as elegies that resist consolation and historical closure. The poems preserve historical tension and expose the persistence of unresolved trauma. Smith establishes this understanding in "Wade in the Water" where fragmented imagery, repetition, and disrupted syntax produce an atmosphere in which slavery and racial violence continue to reverberate within the present. The poem aligns with LaCapra's understanding of absence as transhistorical, which refuses to transform historical suffering into redemption or closure. It stages trauma as an ongoing condition that returns constantly. This method aligns with LaCapra's insistence on "Living with the anxiety of absence" (2001, p. 3), rather than merely reaching an ultimate consolation or closure. Such understanding makes it an ethical responsibility to showcase institutional and governmental marginalization of African-Americans, a responsibility to recovering omitted history and voices.

Similarly, "I Will Tell You the Truth About This, I Will Tell You All About It" resists official narratives that frame emancipation as the complete resolution of racial oppression. Smith urges readers to question such narratives, through the recovery of archival letters written by Black Civil War soldiers and their families. She exposes the inadequacy of historical narratives that attempt to "settle accounts" with slavery through the rhetoric of liberation alone. The preservation of fragmented language and irregular spelling within the poem foreshadows the material conditions of oppression while maintaining the historical specificity of the speaker's voice.

The study concludes that Smith's poetry does not "work through" trauma in a fully redemptive sense. But it situates trauma within the tension between representation and the impossibility of complete recovery. The failure of consolation in her poetry does not specifically abandon hope or meaning altogether, but because complete reconciliation would risk erasing the continuity of historical violence that the poems insist upon remembering.

This conclusion becomes particularly significant in light of LaCapra's distinction between loss and absence. While historical losses such as slavery, racial violence, and segregation may be narrated and mourned, the absence produced by these histories cannot be entirely resolved. Absence exceeds historical events because it becomes embedded within cultural consciousness and collective identity.

In this regard, LaCapra's argument concerning anxiety and absence becomes crucial. Anxiety rooted in absence cannot be permanently cured because it does not emerge from a single recoverable object or event. Unlike loss, which may allow processes of mourning or partial reconciliation, absence remains structurally persistent and resistant to closure. Therefore, trauma can only be "lived with" through ongoing negotiation and critical engagement, and therefore any promise of complete healing becomes illusory (LaCapra, 2001, p. 101). Smith's poetry reflects precisely this condition. Her poetry learns to inhabit trauma ethically by remaining attentive to the wounds and absences that continue to shape African American experience.

Ultimately, this study argues that Smith's poetry transforms elegy into a form of cultural and ethical engagement. Her poems recover suppressed histories to preserve their continuing presence within collective memory. Through this process, trauma becomes transhistorical and persists as a mediated condition that continually reemerges across time retrospectively and prospectively. Smith's poetry insists that the traumatic legacy of slavery and racial oppression remains active within contemporary consciousness and cannot be fully cured or forgotten.

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