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MRP Proposal (MRPP)

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Configuring Wound Culture in 21st Century Fiction:

Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* and Ali Smith's *Hotel World*

Why are we so obsessed with loss and with public expressions of loss? When we answer a call to mourn, are we helping others to heal or are we following a desire to fixate on the open wound? In his essay "Mourning and Melancholia," Sigmund Freud defines mourning as "the reaction to the loss of a beloved person or an abstraction taking the place of the person" (203). Of melancholia, Freud says that it is "a profoundly [more] painful depression" (204). Its characteristics include "loss of interest in the outside world, the loss of the ability to love, the inhibition of any kind of performance and a reduction in the sense of self, expressed in self-recrimination and self-directed insults, intensifying into the delusory expectation of punishment" (204). The melancholic subject feels the strings of attachment that once clung to the lost "loved object" turn inward themselves; eventually, the subject becomes fixated on the wound left open by the loss and he or she is unable to follow through with a successful process of mourning that loss. The term "wound" is key here for the Greek word "trauma" refers to an injury inflicted on the mind and body (Mead 512). The two, then, are inextricably linked in social consciousness: wound culture is a fascination with the open sores left behind by traumata, often in favour of fixation rather than reconciliation. Mark

Selzer addresses the problem of trauma and its relation to representation by advancing the concept of “wound culture” to refer to the public fascination with wounded and injured bodies and persons, what he calls “a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound” (“Wound Culture” 3).

Drawing on relevant trauma theories, my major research paper explores wound culture in 21st century fiction. More specifically, I propose that private and public experiences of trauma within the 21st century become spectacularized by the “wound culture” that exists around social experiences of trauma and loss. Because of this spectacularization, I argue, contemporary Western society is left with a resulting melancholic response to various traumata; a tendency to fixate on experiences of loss and an inability to properly mourn the lost “loved object,” to use Freud’s term. As a result, trauma and loss on both private and public levels, experienced through this melancholic response within a spectacularized, wound-fixated culture, lose their authenticity. In order to consider the effects of the specular on wound culture, I draw on Guy Debord’s theory, for spectacle as Debord says, “is that sector where all attention, all consciousness, converges. [It is] the locus of illusion and false consciousness” (12). Further, Debord suggests that, “in those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail,” life presents itself “as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*” and “all that was once directly lived has become mere representation” (12). Thus the key concepts this research paper will grapple with in relation to the chosen primary texts include “wound culture,” spectacle and spectacularization, as well as mourning and melancholia.

To illuminate these theoretical concerns, I propose a close reading of British writer Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder* (2005) and Scottish writer Ali Smith’s *Hotel World* (2001). I examine their dramatization of private and public experiences of loss and trauma that at once embrace this

melancholic disposition and critique it. To that end, the spectral (“remainder”) figures that are present within the narratives themselves function as representations of the loss of authenticity that takes place in the spectacularization of traumatic experience in 21st century wound culture. In *Remainder*, the protagonist’s experience of working through his loss of self takes a melancholic turn, and he becomes fixated on the traumatic event itself insofar as he cannot heal and mourn successfully. *Hotel World*’s characters experience the loss of a distinctive other, but the damage and harm from the experience inverts itself on the grieving subjects until they too become melancholic and obsess over the traumatic event. Both narratives manifest the melancholic disposition of Western society; the characters’ fixations run so deep that each respective loss becomes a spectacle in and of itself, thus jeopardizing the event’s authenticity. As such, on a private scale, these texts represent the wound culture of public experience and are emblematic of society’s tendency to spectacularize traumata at large.

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