

Representation of Racial Trauma in Clint Smith's *Counting Descent*: A Caruthian Perspective

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Summary:

This research explores the articulation of race-based traumatic stress in Clint Smith's *Counting Descent* (2016). Cathy Caruth's trauma theory is used as a theoretical lens for this exploration. Grounded in Caruth's essential paradigm of trauma, its latency, disruptive return, and ethical witness, this research categorizes Smith's poetry as a powerful intersection between clinical trauma theory and African American literary ethics. Through close analysis of selected poems from the pre-mentioned collection of poems, this research highlights how Smith portrays racial trauma as an individual wound formulating contemporary Black's life. By applying Caruth's core trauma concepts within the violent socio-historical context of slavery and its modern consequences, this research uncovers Smith's poetic strategies, maintaining fragmented narratives, somatic imagery, spatial metaphors, and ecological symbolism, to transform poetry into a testimonial instrument. Furthermore, the research extends Caruth's individual-centered trauma theory to articulate racial trauma as a collective, intergenerational, and spatialized phenomenon.

1. Introduction

Robert T. Carter identifies race-based trauma (PTSD) as "mental and emotional injury caused by encounters with racial bias and discrimination" (cited in Adekson 2021, p.76). It is referred to as a facial-like complex of physiological, psychological, and emotional injuries resulting from continuous exposure to racism and oppression,

leading to symptoms that are often compared to post-traumatic stress. Nevertheless, in Myka Ferrer's words, "all symptoms of post-trauma stress disorder may be present due to racial trauma, even if a Criterion A event cannot be identified" (2021,p.5) Due to the enduring legacy of white supremacy in the United States, as past studies have indicated, "Black people in the United States have the highest lifetime prevalence of PTSD" (Gran-Ruaz, & Taylor, et als. 2022,p.2).

As a reflection of their traumatic trials, Black American poets of excessively explore race traumatic distress in an attempt to uncover it and recover from it. Clint Smith, a contemporary black American author, teacher and activist, is one of the most prominent poetic voices whose poetry highlights post-traumatic stress underwent by the Black Americans in the United States.

Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma, as she explains in her work, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* in 1996, can be viewed as the most sounding traumatic theoretical frameworks via which the complexity of post-trauma stress can be explored and resolved. When it is applied to Black American art and literature, the Caruthian model of trauma, the characterization of trauma as an unclaimed, unspeakable and processed belated experience, are used as poetic strategies by American Black authors to recite their artistic testimony of trauma and racism.

Clint Smith's collection of verse, *Counting Descent*, is one of the most valid literary works in this direction. It serves as a testimony to the lived experiences of Black people under racism, inequality and slavery. In essence, Smith's examination of the themes of racism, trauma, and slavery in this collection advocates the caruth's prominent concepts of trauma and racism. This obvious alignment between Smith's poetic outlook and Caruth's theoretical framework offers a potent groundwork for scholarly inspection.

Building on this foundation, this research aims to investigate how Clint Smith's *Counting Descent* articulates race-based traumatic stress through Caruth's trauma theory. It argues that Smith's poetry portrays trauma as an unassimilated experience marked by latency, fragmentation, bodily inscription, and ethical witness. Through close readings of selected poems from Smith's *Counting Descent*, the research asserts how Smith's poetry manifests racial trauma as individual, intergenerational and ecological distress. Moreover, the research reveals the unique capacity of Smith's work to serve as a collective testimony that confronts the enduring legacy of racial trauma.

To achieve this aim the present research addresses the following questions:

- how does Smith's *Counting Descent* employs Caruthian model of trauma to articulate RBTS as a personal, intergenerational and spatial wound?
- Which poetic methods materialize Caruth's core concepts of trauma, namely: latency, fragmentation, belatedness, witness ?
- How does Smith extend Caruth's trauma principles to explore racial trauma as both historical and ongoing distress?

2. Literature Review

Researches on Clint Smith's *Counting Descent* have powerfully examined its concentration on racial trauma and systemic racism. However, these researches retain significant gaps in having a well-defined trauma theory groundwork to investigate its poetic validity. A summary conducted by Bookey (n.d.) on Smith's *Counting Descent* positions Smith's collection of verse within African-American literary conventions of survival. It asserts Smith's inspection of family legacy, love and communal resilience as opposing vehicles to systemic race-based oppression. Yet Bookey's summary remains descriptive, it overlooks how Smith's poetic strategies, maintaining juxtaposition, fragmentation and spatial symbolism, uncover trauma's unassimilated principles.

Belgrave and Allison's (2018) work, "*African American psychology: From Africa to America*", offers a more critical socio-historical continuum by tracing the legacy of slavery to ongoing racial trauma. Their work supplies a better comprehension of Black vulnerability and establishes a historical context for it. However, Belgrave and Allison lay special emphasis on the psychological structures and historical documentation of Black trauma, while avoiding to extend their examination to literary demonstrations of trauma, such as Smith's activation of poetic silence or spatial allegories.

Cathy Caruth's trauma studies, focused on latency, fragmentation, belatedness, and ethical witness, has been effectively applied to African- American literature. The work of Djekidel and Sebgagui (2023), for instance, exemplifies this validity. It offers a postcolonial analysis of trauma in Toni Morrison's novel *Home*, revealing how Caruthian ingredients highlight racial trauma's literary verbalization. Nevertheless, none of these researches has openly employed Caruth's framework of trauma to Smith's *Counting Descent*. Even the more early work "Trauma in African Literature: Culture and the Phenomenon of Mental Distress in *Achebe's Things Fall Apart* and *Kilanko's Daughters who Walk this Path*" (2022) by Kabir Ahmed. The work has investigated trauma manifestation in African literature, and the cultural evidences of mental distress in these two novels. Thus, The research has merely elevated trauma studies in African contexts, without commenting on contemporary African-American poetry, or more specifically, Smith's innovative poetic strategies in this relation.

Similarly, in his introduction to testimony and Trauma in (African) American Literature, Freedman (2020) develops theories of dual-witnessing and Venn liminality to deal with trauma of the African American race and its testimonial literature. Despite these growing amount of researches, no earlier work has activated Caruth's trauma theory to Smith's poetry. Mustafa (2022) examines trauma and

recovery in Afro-American literature. Yet, he overlooks Smith's poetry entirely, emphasizing, instead, on prose narratives.

Existing researches demonstrate three forceful gaps, namely: a failure to employ Caruth's trauma theory to Smith's poetry; an excessive focus on thematic analysis at the expense of poetic mechanisms; and inadequate merging of clinical and literary frameworks. The present research defies these restrictions by supplying unprecedented systematic Caruthian analysis of *Counting Descent*, highlighting how Smith's poetic strategies, such as fragmentation, somatic imagery, spatial metaphors, exemplifies trauma's prime principles. The result is a unique integrative ideal for exploring literature's role in verbalizing multi-dimensional racial trauma.

3. Methodology

This research presents a textual analysis of Smith's selected poem from his poetic collection, *Counting Descent (2016)*, as an attempt to dwell upon Smith's exploration of race based discrimination and the traumatic injuries it causes to the Black American individuals. Highlighting Caruth's theory of trauma as a primary analytical lens, this research shows how Smith's poetic language, metaphors and imagery articulate the historic, yet persistent wounds of anti-Black racism and its traumatic aftermath, its everlasting personal, intergenerational and spatial traumatic consequences.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1. Contextual and Historical Background

Racial trauma in the African American experience is inseparable from the history of slavery, segregation, and systemic inequality. Each era of racial domination, spanning from the transatlantic slave trade to contemporary police violence, has perpetuated collective and intergenerational injury. Understanding race-based trauma stress within this continuum requires tracing how centuries of racialized violence have produced psychological, social, and cultural effects.

Between the 16th and 17th centuries, millions of Africans were compulsory transported across the Atlantic Ocean, undergoing the inhuman conditions of the Middle Passage and lifelong servitude upon arrival. The transatlantic slave trade constituted what the United Nations designates as the most severe violations of human rights. This dehumanization, as Orlando Patterson (1982) theorizes, produces a "permanent violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonored persons" (p. 13). Cheryl Harris links this violation to modern structures of exclusion where Black bodies remain "objects whose value is extracted" (cited in Phillips, 2025, chap.5). Racism and slavery were not only systems of dehumanization and cultural illumination, but they were also "forced labor systems that required former slaves to work on plantations for several years without pay" (Gardullo & Obenda, et al. 2024, p.125)

Many attempts to alleviate the Black suffering were made and the 1865 was considered as a formal date of terminating slavery and its institutions. Yet, this milestone did not succeed in ending up racism completely. Black Americans remained politically parallelized and socially devalued. As De Marco (2025) notices, America after emancipation "transformed overt enslavement into more covert, systemic mechanisms of subjugation" (p.133). Such systems were nourished by ideologies that positioned whiteness as normative and Blackness as inferior. Feagin's (2013) theory of systemic racism clarifies how racial hierarchy became embedded in every major American institution. He defines racism as a "complex, interconnected, and interdependent array of social networks, organizations, and institutions that routinely embed racial oppression" (p.16). Consequently, trauma prevailed not as isolated acts of prejudice but as a direct result of social and political racial structures. Educational inequities, exploring discrimination, wealth void, and health imbalance all perpetuate somatic and psychological harm, rendering racial suffering an ordinary condition of existence. Meanwhile, the killings of unarmed Black

individuals such as Michael Brown, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd prove how race cruelty preserve collective trauma and anxiety.

As a reactive act to such brutality and maltreatment there appeared the Black Lives Matter movement, a movement which was led by Alicia Garza, and her colleagues. The movement believed in the “ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise” (Onwuachi-Willig, 2021, p. 669). Beyond protest, this movement functions as collective resistance: a form of community-based healing that transforms grief into activism and solidarity. Like Adekson, this movement views racism as a “collective spiritual, psychological, emotional, and cognitive distress” (2021, p.70), demonstrating that racial trauma is not only individual but profoundly communal.

The communal or better termed “intergenerational” dimension of racial trauma further complicates this continuum. This intergenerational trauma transcends appears as what Joy DeGruy terms “Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome”, a “multigenerational trauma compounded by ongoing oppression” (Cited in Berthold & Somsanith, 2024, p. 529). Many studies in epigenetics legitimize this view, maintaining that trauma can alter gene expression, allowing stress responses to be transmitted “biologically across generations” (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018).

4.2. Caruth’s Conception of Trauma

The ongoing evidences of racial brutality, ranging from slavery’s legacy to contemporary state inequality, became the core interest of trauma studies. Many scholars sought to understand how racism permeates the psychological, somatic, and communal well-being of Black communities. Caruth work on trauma emerged as the most prominent in theorizing how such historical and systemic violence becomes encrypted in literary texts. Her work, particularly, *Unclaimed Experience (1996)*, has revolutionized trauma studies. It emphasizes latency, fragmentation, and belatedness. It provides a lens for analyzing how literature reveals trauma and how it

resists linear narration. This is better explained in Caruth definition of trauma as “an experience not known or possessed at the time it occurs,” (p.4). one that returns belatedly through flashbacks, repetition, and narrative disruption. For her, trauma resists direct representation because it overwhelms consciousness; its reality as “unavailable to the consciousness at any given moment,” (Ahmad& Bukhari, et al. 2023,p.2) including at original moment of injury.

This conception reframes trauma an event that is not assimilated when it happens, rather, it is registered belatedly, compelling a bear witness through fragmented recollection. Literature, in Caruth’s view, becomes a fertile soil for such witnessing because narrative form can enact the very belatedness and rupture that define traumatic experience. Smith’s poetic collection can be examined as a sample of such literary texts as it reconfigures Caruth’s trauma framework by exploring "the influence of memory and history on present consciousness" (Bookey, n.d., Chapter 5). It "brings forth the idea that our present is inexorably intertwined with the past," aligning with the collective, historical dimensions of racial trauma central to this study (Bookey, n.d., Chapter 5).

5. Discussion

5.1 Clint Smith's Poetics of Racial Trauma

Clint Smith (born in 1988) emerges as a powerful voice in contemporary African American poetry, whose literary works are designed by his philosophical view point as an educator, scholar and direct witness to racial trauma. Raised in New Orleans, a city typical of America’s racial contradictions, Smith’s early exposure to slavery, discrimination, and cultural resilience offered foundational background for his poetic consciousness. His academic occupation, involving doctoral studies at Harvard University and his job as a teacher in New Orleans prisons, placed him at the intersection of intellectual inquiry and frontline engagement with racial injustice.

The period between 2014 and 2016, when Smith was composing his collection of verse, *Counting Descent*, was crucial in enhancing his examination of racial trauma. It shapes his experience as an eye witness on the pervasive impact of mass incarceration on Black communities and leads him to participate in the burgeoning Black Lives Matter movement after the deaths of Michael Brown (2014) and Eric Garner (2014). These particular activities, along with systemic subjugation and state violence, construct Smith's poetic frame of mind, leading him to compose piece of literature that is not merely aesthetic mediation, but a critical act of local survival and historical liability as well. Smith's materializes this perception in his poetic writing. I.e., Smith's poetry serves as an urgent testimony to break, in his own words, "silence in the face of injustice (Smith, 2014).

As such, unlike the Black poets who deal with trauma through historical imagination or archival distance, Smith's poems carry the immediacy of one who has navigated racial terror as both personal experience and academic concern. His work exposed him to the machinery of mass incarceration. His participation in Black movement justifies his recognition for Blacks right to live freely. This life experience frames Smith's poetic philosophy and declares his poetry as an embodied testimony, communal catalyst, and aesthetic form for ethical standardizations. This viewpoint is highly reflected in Smith's collection, *Counting Descent*, a collection which stands as "a call to action and awakening," urging readers to "engage critically with the world around them" (Bookey, n.d., Chapter 7).

For Smith, in relation to PTSD's poems, poetry is composed not to represent trauma, but to enact what he terms "the unspeakable weight" of pre-established racism (Smith, 2017). To a large extent, these poetic philosophies resonate with Caruth's depiction of trauma's simultaneous unutterably and moral demand for articulation. Thus, his poetry operates as a personal confession and collective testimony. It transforms individual encounters with racism into a shared vocabulary for

understanding systemic injury. For him, poetry must nourish and protect Black communities, challenge dominant narratives, establish Black America's history, and hence imagine prospects beyond trauma's bounds.

5.2 Analysis of Smith's *Counting Descent* Through the Lens of Caruth's Trauma Theory

In this collection, Smith's poems repeatedly return to sites of Black's vulnerability and maltreatment. This thematic preoccupation ranges from the depictions of drowning Black bodies, and the threat of state violence to the precariousness of Black joy in this collection. To a large extent, Smith's examination of such themes reveals his deep understanding of the Black racial trauma as both lived experience and inherited condition. He, throughout his collection, strives to give voice to what Leary names "Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome" or better named the "multigenerational trauma together with continued oppression," (Berthold & Somsanith, 2024, p. 529) a trauma which shapes contemporary Black subjectivity.

This section examines the manifestations of racial trauma in Smith's *Counting Descent*, employing Caruth's prime concepts of trauma, namely: its latency, fragmentation, belatedness, and ethical imperative, as an analytical lens for such examination. It, thematically, groups the selected poems from this collection, into three primary groups. First, poems concerned with personal trauma, individual encounters with racial violence. Second, poems deals with intergenerational trauma, collective wounds transmitted across time and space. Third, poems dwells upon ecological and spatial trauma of racial wounding. These three sub-divisions systematically engage with Caruth's prime concepts of trauma, allowing a better comprehension of race-based trauma distress, and giving a better chance of uncovering it and recovering from it.

5.2.1 Personal Trauma

The poems "Something You Should Know" and "My Jump Shot" depict trauma as an individual experience. Those two poems focus on the psychological and somatic consequences of racial violence on the personal psyche.

In "Something You Should Know", Smith advocates the somatic influence of racism stemming from an individual's encounter with racial violence. The poem is told from the perspective of a Black child in a pet store. The child encounters a crab whose hermit is in a molting process. Smith connotes this metaphor, "hermit crab", to voice his personal experience of raced trauma stress. Applying this metaphor of biological fragility, Smith expresses his fragility as a Black individual who was involved in a traumatic racial trail. Smith writes: "I watched the hermit crab continue / to grow, molt, shed its skin and scurry across / the bottom of the aquarium to find a new shell" (Smith, 2016, lines 6–8). These lines obviously advocates Caruth's view of trauma as unassimilated experience that could be comprehended at the time of its happening.

The crab's fragility in the molting process leads the poet to re-enliven a past personal traumatic situation which, to a great extent, he could not comprehend at the time of its occurrence. This biological process serves as an analogy for a personal racial traumatic experiment. Smith writes:

"Which left me afraid for the small creature,
to run around all exposed that way, to have
to live its entire life requiring something else
to feel safe" (Smith, 2016, lines 9–12).

Fanon's research on the somatic experience of racial trauma introduces a valid context for analyzing this poem, as it observes that the Black body prevails in a state of "epidermalization" where racial groups are "lived in the flesh" (Fanon, 2008, p. 94). The crab's vulnerability, evident in the word "exposed" and the phrases

"requiring something else / to feel safe", materializes Fanon's concept of the Black body as a medium of eternal exposure to hostile environments. This encounter, on the part of the poem's persona, recalls a past traumatic racial experience that the speaker could not comprehend fully at the time of its happening.

Put it differently, the Black child's insight in the pet store acts as a personification for Black existence in a racist neighborhood. The poem's ethical witness is completely evident in its concluding lines, where the appetite for connection struggles with terror of exposure. Smith declares: "Perhaps that is why, even now, I can want so desperately / to show you all of my skin, but am more afraid /of meeting you, exposed, in open water" (Smith, 2016, lines 17–19).

This tension recalls Caruth's ethical imperative, where trauma of vulnerability demands witness and resilience. The "open water", which Smith refers to, echoes both the hermit crab's fish bowl and the personal distance of racialized exposure, connecting individual's organic weakness to shared racial trauma. It parallels Caruth declaration that "the ethical dimension of trauma theory is found in its imperative to listen, to bear witness, to the voice crying from the wound of the Other" (cited in Story, 2021, p.14). Smith's poem seizes this outlook. It demonstrates how racial trauma effects individual's biology and personal archive. In this context, the Bookey's summary on Smith's *Counting Descent* asserts the "emotional landscapes" in Smith's collection and affirms how Smith writes about "the ever-present anxiety that accompanies Black existence" and his "fear of becoming another statistic"(Bookey, n.d., Chap.4).

"My Jump Shot" is one more poem which highlights personal encounter with racial trauma as a belated return. The poem opens with the persona depicting his incorrect basketball jump shot, which he describes as an "all elbow and no wrist", and hence he goes further to explain how his shot lacks completion, as he asks " what a follow through is". Apparently, the poem serves as a mere confession of athletic

awkwardness. Yet, this mechanical defect functions as a metaphor for uncomprehend personal trauma.

The jump shot's brokenness symbolizes how traumatic experiences disrupt natural movement, progression and expression, as Smith says: "My jump shot be / all elbow and no wrist" (Smith, 2016, lines 1–2). This mirrors the lingering impact of personal trauma which returns in disruptive fashions as it is highlighted in the line "asking what a follow through is" (Smith, 2016, lines 4).

In this manner, the speaker's jump shot and the failure of it elevates from being a failure in a physical routine act into a racialized unprocessed experience, embodying Caruth's insight that trauma "returns to haunt the victim" (Hesford & Kozol, 2000, p.25). The traumatic return is echoed in the fragmented declarations in the coming lines:

"My jump shot be
Medusa.

My jump shot be
the leftovers you don't really want to eat.

My jump shot be
the fridge that don't work.

My jump shot be
the sour milk in your cereal." (Smith, 2016, lines 7–13).

Smith use of fragmented metaphors in the above lines echoes his desire to assert that Black trauma is not abstract. It is evident in the "fridge", "cereal" and in the "jump shot". This portrays trauma as something inevitable or a happening that is impossible to be fully processed or integrated. The "Medusa" metaphor in the above lines recalls Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's work on performativity in Black society. Jackson asserts that Black individuals are usually obliged to "perform" under the "white gaze", which turns the "Black into objects of judgment and fear" (Jackson.

2021, p. 45). Smith's metaphor of "Medusa" in the above lines clearly echoes this viewpoint. Thus, the "jump shot" turns into a traumatic activity, which converts Black bodies into objects of fear, under the pressure of the white's gaze.

Smith goes further to link the "jump shot" as a metaphor for what it looks like to be a Black citizen in the America community :

"My jump shot be

code-switching.

My jump shot be

making people nervous just because it's a jump shot.

My jump shot be

the only jump shot in class.

My jump shot be getting asked to speak

on behalf of all the other jump shots." (Smith, 2016, lines 19–24).

The lines above maintain the idea that being a Black member in America indicates that you have to be treated as if you are under the microscope, so that you could not possess your words, body or identity.

However, Smith terminates his poem with a refusal to let trauma shapes him. He turns his personal pain into ethical witness, a core principle of Caurath's trauma theory. He confesses trauma heavy burden while also glorifying the bravery of those who articulate it:

My jump shot be

gluten-free.

My jump shot be

Michael Jordan when he was seven.

My jump shot be

spending too much time in the library.

My jump shot be

making everybody else feel better about their jump shot (Smith.2016,Lines:19-25)

5.2.2. Intergenerational Trauma

The poems "Counterfactual" and "For the Black Boys Who Never Learned How to Swim" primarily depict trauma as a collective, historical wound transmitted across generations and inscribed in both cultural memory and physical space. These poems exemplify Caruth's concept of trauma as belatedly returning historical violence, employing the body as archive, fragmentation, and the ethics of witnessing to bear witness to systemic anti-Black violence.

"Counterfactual" powerfully illustrates Caruth's conception of trauma as an unhealed wound characterized by a belated return. The poem opens with a childhood play where the ambiguity of "some place" that the poet could not remember instigate what Caruth identifies as a belated return of a traumatic experience that, in Caruth's words, "is not known or possessed at the time it occurs" (1996, p. 4).

The poem opens with a Black child playing innocently with White boys in "some place" that the poem's persona could not fully remember. This moment of joy and innocence on the part of the poem's persona is suddenly shattered by the urgent warning of the poem's persona's father. The father scold his child, giving him a lesson in racial survival. Smith writes:

"Told me I couldn't be out here
acting the same as these white boys—
can't be pretending to shoot guns
can't be running in the dark
can't be hiding behind anything
other than your own teeth" (Smith, 2016, lines 11–16).

The father's warning does not act as a father's rule, but it serves as an intergenerational transmission of racial trauma. The speaker could not understand the trauma at the time of its happening. He grasps it later, when similar occurrence stir his memory to recall his the father's warning.

Bookey's summary on this collection discusses how Smith in this poem deals with "the complex terrain of the Black experience in America" (Bookey, n.d., Chapter 2). It provides a context here, as it notices how Smith "unflinchingly examines the personal impact of societal structures" and highlights the "enduring legacy of systemic racism" embodied in these intergenerational warnings of the father (Bookey, n.d., Chapter 2).

Then, the poem continues the father's warning to his child, and each warning encodes specific "multigenerational trauma together with continued oppression" (Berthold & Somsanith, 2024, p. 529). Similarly, the poem's line, "other than your own teeth", highly signifies feeling that the only refuge that is left to him is to hide behind his teeth. This metaphorically serves as internalized awkwardness within the speaker. It also recalls what Caruth calls "a double wound, where a victim with a painful experience faces trauma twice: once as the witness of his trauma and again in the re-experiencing of the traumatic event" (1996,p. 89) .

The poem culminates in the speaker's belated understanding of this traumatic wound when he says:

"I know now how scared

he must have been.

how easily I could have fallen

into the empty of the night." (Smith, 2016,lines 17-20).

This final abrupt turn to "I know now" embodies Caruth's principle of belated grasp, where the full significance of the traumatic event emerges only retrospectively, transforming the innocence of a child into an adult's comprehension of racial

burden. This is obviously true in Smith's declaration of his father's fears that his child's playing with White boys may be mistaken by "some man" who may not recognize "that water for a good reason / to wash all of this away" (2016.lines:24-25). This stands for racism and White supremacy's desire to eliminate Black presence. It reveals that the historic wound of the Black remains unhealed, as its essence increases over time. As Snider (2020) notes, Smith's poetry "makes visible the persistence of racial wound" by showing how "historical violence resurfaces in the present" (p.78), a process Caruth identifies as trauma's defining characteristic of latency.

Not so far from "Counterfactual" is Smith's "For the Black Boy Who Never Learned How to Swim". The poem again offers an illustration on how intergenerational trauma works as somatic inscription and deprivation. The poem reveals an incident of police violence directed toward the Black. Smith links this incident to a larger historical context. The poem opens with a police disruption that locates trauma in the collective Black body:

"The police sirens sounded like wind
getting knocked out of our stomachs.
We tried to find a place to pull over
where there was a semblance of light.
There was no light" (Smith, 2016, lines: 1–5).

These lines deepens the idea that trauma turns Black bodies into sites which carry centuries of trauma. As if Smith is asserting that the police light which flashes today is another translation of the guts clench which his ancestors encountered when slave arresters came. Smith's writes: "There was no light" because he, like the other members of his race, is hunted in darkness of the past traumatic happenings.

The simile "like wind / getting knocked out of our stomachs" indicates the somatic burden of this trauma. It can be aligned with Caruth's assertion that trauma's wound is transmitted through literature's "very indirectness" and how "its figurative language, gaps in speech and linguistic particularities" (Alpert, 2001). Smith's visceral imagery thus materializes the "unassimilated" nature of racial trauma, where the body becomes the archive of violence that language struggles to contain. The absence of light signifies the absence of safety, a deprivation that has historical roots in slavery and its aftermath. Kelley's work on Black spatiality provides critical context here, as he argues that Black freedom has always been constrained by "intergenerational control" that denies Black citizens' access to safe spaces (Kelley, 2017, p. 78).

The traumatic violation in this poem is intensified with the poet's depiction of the dehumanizing brutality that echoes centuries of anti-Black violence:

"they grabbed him

like he wasn't somebody's child.

palmed the back of his head

like a fruit ready to be dropped" (Smith, 2016, lines: 7–10).

The simile "like he wasn't somebody's child" explicitly explains the act of dehumanization inherent in anti-Black violence, reducing the Black body to "a fruit ready to be dropped". This imagery connects contemporary police violence to historical lynching and slavery, embodying Caruth's insight that trauma "is not locatable in a simple violent event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature... returns to haunt the survivor" (1996, p. 4).

Smith's ending lines assert that because of the police brutality the bodies of the Black individuals are turned into panic at the sound of sirens. For him, Black race in America are like someone thrown into deep water without life jacket. This metaphorically gives voice to the intergenerational trauma of the African-Americans,

depicting their trauma as a constant injury that never heals because the community which causes it has not changed. Smith terminates his poem saying: "But where is the water? / When has there ever been water? / When have we ever been allowed to swim?" (2016. lines 15–17).

5.2.3. Ecological and spatial Trauma

Beside exploring personal and intergenerational exploration of racial trauma in Smith's collection of poems, *Counting Descent*, this section accounts for the ecological and spatial racial trauma in the pre-mentioned collection. Once again the poems' analysis in this section is grounded in Caruth's trauma conception. It dwells upon the ecological and spatial incidents of racial trauma. The traumatic features of latency, somatic evidences and its ethical urgency is dealt from ecological and spatial perspectives. Powerful to this exploration are Smith's two poems in this collection, namely: "what the cicada said to the black boy" and "Beyond This Place".

In "what the cicada said to the black boys" the Caruthian model of trauma is manifested through Smith's ecological metaphors. The poem is narrated from an animal's perspective, as if an animal is giving instruction to somebody else concerning an important issue. The poem compares a black boys to cicadas. How do they get treated and their differences. Smith uses personifications and metaphors to reveal the societal mistreated suffered by the Blacks. Smith compares this mistreatment to the maltreated underwent by the cicadas when they appear.

Thus, the cicada in this poem works as an ecological witness to racial trauma. It incarnates Caruth's prime conception of trauma as an unassimilated experience, its belated return, and the urgency for ethical witness. The cicada's saying: "i've seen what they make of you, / how they render you a multiplicity / of mistakes" (Smith.2016.lines:1-2), directly advocates trauma as an injury that endure apprehension into linear narrative. This echoes Caruth's insistence on the idea that

trauma is "not known or possessed at the time it occurs" (1996, p. 4). It comes into surface via confronting fragmented occurrences.

The occurrence of encountering cicada's in a trial of mistreatment enliven the poem's person traumatic experiences. The cicad says:

"they have undone me as well,
pulled back my shell & feasted
on my flesh

claimed it was for survival, " (Smith,2016, lines:4-7)

These lines metaphorically materializes the unassimilated pain suffered Black bodies under systems racism. They link the insect's biological weakness to the ongoing vulnerability of Black boys under the tyrannical racial systems. As such, Smith's poem extends Caruth's trauma model beyond the human, locating the natural world as a testimony of racial inequality where trauma threatens in the horizon, cycles of life and soil.

The cicada's seventeen-year life span, a cyclical emergence that reflects how racial trauma enlivens across generations. The cicada word's directed to the Black boy when it says:" lucky if they let you live that long," (Smith.2016.Line: 11) powerfully affirms the premature of death as a normal expectation for him as a Black citizen in a society which gives normalcy to White's supremacy: 'you know have been playing this game / since before you knew what breath was" (Smith.2016, Lines:13-15).

The poem terminates in a way which echoes Caruth's ethical imperative via uttering the cicada's advice to the boy: "get you some wings, son. / get you some wings." (Smith,2016,Lines: 22-23). This advice converts individual endurance, laying resilience as testimony. The "wings" stands for the biological adaptation of the cicadas as well as the ethical urgency for the Black's to rise above racial brutality: "every time you swarm,"(line20) the cicada insists, "you write this poem again" (line 21). In this way, Smith activates Caruth's conception of trauma and its ethical

urgency to be heard by others. Smith plants this urgency in the ecological environment as the cicada, a non-human fighter, instructs the Black boy that resistance is his only strategy to keep living.

In "Beyond This Place," Smith introduces the prison as a spatialized site of trauma where Caruth's model of trauma, maintaining the principles of latency, fragmentation and ethical urgency, can be examined. Smith initiates his poem with the portrayal of the prison as an a spatialized concrete institution of tyranny where:

"The air is thick with ambivalence.

The residue of those both forgotten and pushed away.

A watchtower too certain of its own authority.

Barbed wire coils itself precariously

around the edges of the prison" (Smith,2016,Lines:1-5).

The "barbed wire" and "watchtower" in the lines above view trauma through spatialized lens. I.e., the prison in this poem is primarily referred to as a spatialized space which retains the conventions of slavery and racial confinement. Thus, the prison is identified as a stifling traumatic reminder of existing, yet an unintegrated wound:

"invisible against a backdrop of concrete walls.

Barbed wire coils itself precariously

around the edges of the prison.

It can be difficult to tell what they are trying

to keep in and what they are trying to keep out.

Chain linked fences standing upright as soldiers do. (Smith,2016,Lines:7-12)

After establishing the prison as a spatialized trauma monument, as it is materialized in phrases like: "Chain linked fences", "cage" and "a backdrop of concrete walls", etc. (Smith.2016.Lines:7,10,12), Smith moves into considering how the act of writing could operate as a vehicle of speaking, in caruth's words, the "unspeakable". The

prison is elevated from being a “cage” into a “refuge” where a “A circle of men swallowed / by the world’s indifference” (Smith,2016,Lines:30-31) have turned their traumatic space into an urgent imperative of resilience, a core principle of Caurath’s trauma theory. Through their texts, those men try to remind people of their “the totality of their personhood” (Smith,2016,Lines: 33) and how by “a single act” they “have become singularly defined” (Smith,2016,Lines: 35). So, those Black prisoners “refuse to forget themselves” beyond the concrete walls of their prison. They declared that, as Smith writes, “Each word provides the sort of liberation / a parole board can never grant” (Smith,2016,42-43). They assert that “their writing is a declaration / of all that makes them whole.” (Smith,2016, Lines:39-40).

Smith concludes his poem with ethical imperatives, essential to Caurath’s trauma theory. He asserts the men’s writings is “ the sort of thing that reminds them that/ they once existed beyond this place / That they still do” (Smith.2016.Lines: 53-55). This assertion further confirms enduring personhood of the prisoners, despite the prison’s “logic of elimination” (Davis, 2003, p. 112). Typically, the poem’s closing aligns with Caruth’s confirmation that trauma as “a story spoken about a wound in an attempt to reveal a secret ” (Caurath.2016,p.12). The prisoners’ words become acts of, in Davis’ terminology, the “abolition democracy” (Davis, 2003) which challenges the systemic dehumanization and transcends physical space into sites of resilience and continuity .

6. Conclusion

Clint Smith’s *Counting Descent* arises as a innovatory poetic work that skillfully portrays the multi-dimensional essence of racial trauma through the lens of Cathy Caurath’s theory of trauma. This research asserts that Smith’s poetic tacit, maintaining somatic imagery, fragmentation, ecological analogies, and moral perceiving, operate as vital approach for incarnating and revealing the unarticulated, delayed, and generational injures of racial discrimination. By methodically

employing Caruth's basic ingredients, such as: latency, lateness, fracture, and the urgency to bear witness, the present research utilizes how Smith exceeds traditional exploration of trauma, converting poetry into a medium of testimony that defies silence and retraction.

Furthermore, Smith's poetic collection expands the scope of trauma discourse beyond personal ordeal to beset ecological and intergenerational dimensionality, so that aligning racial trauma as a spatialized and communal aspect. His collection demonstrates the profound wound caused by slavery, racism and communal violence. It also manifests how Black's resilience and strength are valuable for mending together.

Through this examination of Cauth's trauma theory and poetic craft, *Counting Descent* asserts poetry's active contribution in bearing witness to, deal with, and ultimately confront racialized trauma. Thus, Smith's *Counting Descent* does not expand the field of trauma studies within African American literature, but it also highlights the transformative potential of poetry as an ethical vehicle of remembrance, documentation, and resilience in the progressive conflict for racial equality.

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تمثيل الصدمة العنصرية في النسب العدي لكلينت سميث: منظور كاروثي

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الكلمات المفتاحية: الصدمة، العنصرية، كاروث، العبودية

الملخص:

يستكشف هذا البحث تجليات الضغوط النفسية المرتبطة بالعرق في قصيدة "الانحدار العدي" (2016) لكلينت سميث. وتُستخدم دراسات كاثي كاروث في مجال الصدمات كإطار نظري لهذا الاستكشاف. انطلاقاً من نموذج كاروث الأساسي للصدمة، وكامونيتها، وعودتها المزعزعة، وشهادتها الأخلاقية، يُصنّف هذا البحث شعر سميث كتقاطع قوي بين نظرية الصدمة السريرية وأخلاقيات الأدب الأمريكي الأفريقي. ومن خلال تحليل دقيق لقصائد مختارة من المجموعة المذكورة، يُسلط هذا البحث الضوء على كيفية تصوير سميث للصدمة العرقية كجرح فردي يُشكل حياة السود المعاصرة. ومن خلال تطبيق مفاهيم كاروث الجوهريّة للصدمة في السياق الاجتماعي-التاريخي العنيف للعبودية وعواقبها الحديثة، يكشف هذا البحث عن استراتيجيات سميث الشعرية، من خلال الحفاظ على السرديات المجزأة، والصور الجسدية، والاستعارات المكانية، والرمزية البيئية، لتحويل الشعر إلى أداة شهادة. علاوةً على ذلك، يُوسّع البحث نظرية كاروث حول الصدمة المتمركزة حول الفرد ليُفصّل الصدمة العرقية كظاهرة جماعية، عابرة للأجيال، ومكانية، مستفيداً من كيفية تسهيل الشعر للمعالجة الجماعية للجروح التي تصمد أمام السرديات السائدة.