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Boot Camp for the Psyche: Inoculative Nonfiction and Pre-Memory Structures as Preemptive Trauma Mediation in Fiction and Film

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“BOOT CAMP FOR THE PSYCHE”: INOCULATIVE NONFICTION AND PRE-MEMORY
STRUCTURES AS PREEMPTIVE TRAUMA MEDIATION IN FICTION AND FILM

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of

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ABSTRACT

“BOOT CAMP FOR THE PSYCHE”: INOCULATIVE NONFICTION AND PRE-MEMORY
STRUCTURES AS PREEMPTIVE TRAUMA MEDIATION IN FICTION AND FILM

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Department of English

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While some theorists have hinted at various social functions served by the gothic genre—such as providing an outlet for grief, anxiety, and violence in their various forms—recent research within the last few decades into sociology, military science, and trauma studies supplies compelling new ways of rereading the horror genre. In addition to providing an outlet for grief, anxiety, and violence in their various forms, horror media can now be read as a preemptive measure in an effort to mediate the immediate and long-term effects of the trauma and horror faced by humanity. I argue that in much the same way an author may write a self-help tract such as *The Gift of Fear* to try and inform women how to repel a sexual predator by graphically relating harrowing tales of sexual predation, so do some horror texts and film claim to preemptively mediate different types of trauma before, during, and after it occurs. This is done in each case not by merely scaring readers, but by inoculating them against them against future debilitating trauma before, during, and after it may occur. The relatively recent (or at

least recently popularized) genre of self-help books that overtly seeks to prepare its audience for future trauma by exposing them to it in a controlled environment draws upon the canon of gothic literature for its inspiration as well as for its rhetorical strategies and literary devices. Without discounting the aesthetics and the utility of horror as a psychological outlet, I will show that gothic media can be reread and reconfigured within this new framework. By realigning horror studies within the framework of trauma studies and the possibility for inoculation against future trauma, this study will provide new insight into one how popular culture often portrays trauma through text, and I will seek to establish a new category affiliated with both trauma theory and horror, the study and representation of pre-memory. This thesis will also present as a case study the rhetorical self-inoculation of American horror author H.P. Lovecraft.

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“Kids who are in a much more chaotic state of mind and life than most adults remember or realize, they can go into these [horror films] as kind of boot camps for the psyche, as I have said. Strengthening their egos, strengthening their sense of fortitude; just as a soldier comes, you know, from momma’s arms into the drill instructor’s gaze and ends hardened, but feeling like he can survive battle. I think that’s, in a sense, what goes on with kids that go to scary movies. And it’s something that the grownups never seem to think about; they’re always worried about, ‘Oh, the kids have been damaged, the kids have been traumatized.’ It’s always been kind of the basis for my sort of optimism about what I do, and of being kind of a right thing, because the kids feel spontaneously grateful for it, even if it gives them nightmares, there’s something going on there that is needed.”

—Wes Craven (2000)

CHAPTER ONE: THEORIZING TRAUMA INOCULATION

“He had probably been watching her for a while. We aren’t sure—but what we do know is that she was not his first victim. [. . .] She closed the door behind her, pushing it until she heard it latch. She is certain she locked it, which means he must have already been inside the door” (de Becker *Gift* 1). This unsettling narrative details the sinister account of rape and attempted murder of Kelly, a naïve yet likeable twenty-something who barely escapes with her life. The dialogue is filled with tears and terror, and the tale is deliberately designed to elicit a powerful emotional response from its audience. Kelly’s narrative is so compelling, in fact, that the book containing the account of her ordeal became an international commercial success, though not in the way you might think. Kelly’s story is similar to thousands of other horror genre pieces, yet this passage is not from a teen stalker film, nor is it text from a thriller novel; this is the introduction from a self-help book designed to teach the public how to defend themselves from violence.

In recent years, much of the academic inquiry regarding horror fiction and film focused on trying to define its existence and appeal to mass audiences. Many reactionary critics continually rail against the genre, citing it as the causative agent for criminals, violence, and sexual deviancy. Other camps argue the opposite: that horror may serve to placate the primitive urges of the id, provide social catharsis, or reinforce morality by delimiting deviancy. However, historically speaking, horror’s *raison d’être* goes beyond merely attempting to scare or entertain, and scholarship surrounding horror studies often neglects to address what is arguably one of the genre’s original and

primary purposes as a highly pragmatic pedagogical mechanism. This resistance is likely due to the fact that many academics are hesitant to write about issues of supposed didacticism that may chafe against personal interpretations of a supposed postmodern aesthetic. As horror studies finally climbs its way out of a lengthy phase of recuperation, many zealous scholars, who have scabbled for decades in a quest for legitimacy, are loath to do anything they worry may cheapen their work. Kelly's deliberately didactic tale of terror complicates this current methodology and demands that scholars do not fail to account for the rising number of horrific texts specifically designed to teach audiences.

Inoculative Nonfiction

In Gavin de Becker's instructional text, *The Gift of Fear* (1997), Kelly's thoroughly sensationalized account of shocking terror suggests that scholars must reconcile current understandings of trauma and horror as merely aesthetic escapism or social catharsis with its pragmatic pedagogical potential. Defying attempts at literary categorization, Kelly's story shows that horror fiction and film need to be reevaluated to take into account the consideration that "real life" trauma can be mediated by text. While some theorists have hinted at various social functions served by the gothic genre¹—such as providing an outlet for grief, anxiety, and violence in their various forms—recent research within the last few decades into sociology, military science, and trauma studies supplies compelling new ways of rereading the horror genre. In addition to providing an

¹ This study will, as does Matt Hills in *The Pleasures of Horror*, conflate the terms "gothic" and "horror" to deliberately depart from the longstanding tradition of academe that privileges the former term as "high art" and treats the latter as a pejorative.

outlet for grief, anxiety, and violence in their various forms, horror media can now be read as a preemptive measure in an effort to mediate the immediate and long-term effects of the trauma and horror faced by humanity. I argue that in much the same way an author may write a self-help tract such as *The Gift of Fear* to try and inform women how to repel a sexual predator by graphically relating harrowing tales of sexual predation, so do some horror texts and film claim to preemptively mediate different types of trauma before, during, and after it occurs. This is done in each case not by merely scaring readers, but by inoculating them against future debilitating trauma before, during, and after it may occur. The relatively recent (or at least recently popularized) genre of self-help books that overtly seeks to prepare its audience for future trauma by exposing them to it in a controlled environment draws upon the canon of gothic literature for its inspiration as well as for its rhetorical strategies and literary devices. Without discounting the aesthetics and the utility of horror as a psychological outlet, I will show that gothic media can be reread and reconfigured within this new framework. By realigning horror studies within the framework of trauma studies and the possibility for inoculation against future trauma, this study will provide new insight into one how popular culture often portrays trauma through text and I will seek to establish a new category affiliated with both trauma theory and horror, the study and representation of pre-memory.

Even though Stephen King labeled Clive Barker “the future of horror” in 1984², current historical trends suggest that this title may have come prematurely. Though the staples of westernized horror—maniacs, monsters, witchcraft, etc.—have certainly not been discarded by contemporary culture, a much more likely candidate of the future of popular horror consumption is the realm of interdisciplinarianism. The nascent genre of self-help books that seek to prepare readers for future trauma by exposing them to it—which I will hereafter call *inoculative nonfiction*—presents a new, interdisciplinary-minded stage in the evolution of the gothic text. Following on the tails of its commercially successful frontrunners, Gavin de Becker and Dave Grossman, aspiring authors from a wide variety of backgrounds and writing ability are trying their hand at inoculative nonfiction. Though predominantly featuring those with military, law enforcement, or martial arts experience, the canon is rapidly growing and gaining credence in the world of pop-psychology.³ This chapter will seek to introduce the concept of inoculative nonfiction and reconcile it with current understandings of trauma theory and horror studies, chapter two will specifically address and analyze inoculative nonfiction as a genre at length, and chapter three will examine an instance of literary self-inoculation.

² After Stephen King read Barker’s *Books of Blood* (1984) he claimed, “I have seen the future of horror and its name is Clive Barker” which became the text’s official dustcover endorsement.

³ Oprah claimed *The Gift of Fear* is, “the most important book I have ever read” (Charlie Rose) and crowned de Becker “the nation’s leading expert on violent behavior” (de Becker, *Gift*, Back Cover). Though her endorsement is perhaps dubious in the eyes of seasoned critics, Oprah Winfrey’s praise of *The Gift of Fear* certainly helped de Becker maintain its position on various bestseller lists and place his books in millions of homes around the world.

Inoculative nonfiction employs a common strategy throughout the majority of its canon: graphic, gripping narrative is presented with ample portions of blood and terror, and is then followed by careful exposition and analysis. Indeed, all of the stories have a specific pedagogical function. While the goal of the narrative's overt didacticism is not related to conventional morality or ethics, the premise of these texts revolves around informing the reader how to better prepare for future violence and hopefully mediates future trauma by textually inoculating against it. Upon reading, one cannot help but notice the stylistic similarities between these self-help books and similarly-themed gothic texts: both rely on hyper-dramatic representation to shock and frighten their audience. Theorist Linda Holland-Toll defines horror as "any text which has extreme or supernatural elements, induces (as its primary intention and/or effect) strong feelings of terror, horror, or revulsion in the reader, and generates a significant amount of unresolved dis/ease within the reader" (6). Holland-Toll's description presents a near perfect summary for inoculative nonfiction as well: its primary purpose is to instill extreme amounts of fear and revulsion, and does so for the explicit purpose of seeking to preemptively mediate future exposure to trauma.

This chapter will seek to avoid several of the pedestrian pitfalls associated with horror studies, and to do so I will draw from the disclaimer offered by Matt Hills in *The Pleasures of Horror* (2005), which successfully negotiates several similar methodological problems. First, this study must refrain from essentializing horror texts as having "an inevitably mimetic relation between fiction and its viewers" (3), as this overly simplistic methodology—commonly adopted by reactionary media figures—tends unproductively

to end in pathologizing the reader and author. Equally fruitless is the practice of quantizing audience response and textual intentionality, and neither will any attempt be made to rank the authenticity of a set of traumatic events or narrowly define what can be called horror: “horror's pleasures [. . .] can only be accessed culturally—that is, made sense of, reported, discussed, claimed, disavowed—through grids and templates of meaning or ‘discursive practices’” (xii). What I will examine is how these authors claim that horror acts performatively to modify perceptions and behaviors in various people by varying degrees, which can be illustrated most clearly in the case of inoculative non-fiction. I will contextualize my project within various frameworks from the fields of both horror and trauma studies in an attempt to discursively reconcile previous scholarship and establish how we can now read inoculative nonfiction as a new stage in the evolution of the gothic text.

Inoculative Nonfiction and Horror

One of the most useful places to begin examining horror’s pedagogic potential is to analyze and problematize a significant distinction made by Noël Carroll between “natural horror” and “art-horror.” Carroll claims that natural horror is similar to the experience of being chased through the woods by a bear; the attendant fear will likely produce a common set of psychological and physiological reactions that we commonly associate with fear and panic. By contrast, “art-horror” is the experience of watching a film or reading a book about being chased through the woods by a bear. Carroll further claims that horror texts tend to elicit a similar effect on their audiences; the compelling nature of this simulated danger may evoke symptoms that closely imitate the fear and

revulsion associated with genuine danger: terror, shivers, goose-bumps, nausea, screaming, and so forth.

For Carroll, horror typically art-horrifies audiences through the exhibition of monstrosity in several forms; that which is threatening or disgusting triggers an emotional response that echoes, but does not fully achieve, the psychological and physiological effects of natural horror. As examples, Carroll points specifically to entities which are interstitial or culturally designated as impure: the wolf-man is a categorical anomaly; the slimy monster reminds us of our feces, which generates revulsion. However, regardless of the nature of the monster involved, an audience's response to art-horror is necessarily different from natural horror, claims Carroll, since the audience inherently realizes that what they see on a movie screen or read in a book is fictitious. In something akin to voyeurism, the realm of art-horror lies within the perceptions of the audience. Whereas an audience may describe a Dracula-inspired film as "spine-tingling" and experience a very real emotional response, no one in the audience actually thinks Dracula is real and runs screaming out of the theater for fear of attack, and nor does the audience need to pretend Dracula is real to feel terror at the film:

saying we are art-horrified by Dracula means we are horrified by the thought of Dracula where the thought of such a possible being does not commit us to a belief in his existence. Here, the thought of Dracula, the thing that art-horrifies me, is not the event of my thinking of Dracula but the content of the thought, viz., that Dracula, a threatening and impure being of such and such dimensions, might exist and do these terrible

things, nor need it be assumed that I am reflexively aware of the content of my thought. Dracula is presented onscreen and I am art-horrified by the prospect that there could be such a being perpetrating such deeds.

(“Nature of Horror” 56)

Carroll’s distinction between real and simulated horror is valuable, and, in most cases, is quite useful as a sociological marker. However, contemporary evolutions of the gothic genre problematize this line as not only cloudy, but as one where extensive slippage occurs between the two. Audiences cannot always tell the difference between art and natural horror⁴, and many texts are now explicitly designed to conflate the two⁵.

Inoculative nonfiction can be read in two primary ways: either it occupies a liminal territory between any categorization of natural and art-horror, or it occupies both spaces simultaneously. As a print medium, de Becker’s audience realizes that the threat felt by Kelly during her rape is not a threat to them. Even though the book is based on “real” (natural horror) events, not only does the story indicate the attacker has already been convicted and confined, but readers ostensibly consume the book while in the safety of their own locked and otherwise safe homes. Kelly’s ordeal thus art-horrifies the audience; shock, revulsion, goose-bumps, and nausea may accompany its reading, depending on the emotional state of the reader. However, it is not the author’s

⁴ Children are an obvious example, as they may not be able to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Thus, either there may not be any difference between art-horror and natural horror for children, or art-horror simply does not exist for them as a static category.

⁵ The commercially successful style of *cinéma-vérité* filmmaking creates films that often go to great lengths to spuriously “prove” their authenticity. Horror films that adopt this style include *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and the more recent *Cloverfield* (2008).

intent to merely art-horrify the audience; de Becker wants the trauma to be real enough—that is, as similar to natural horror as he can successfully achieve—that his reader can empathize strongly enough with the characters in the text to actually *experience* some sense of “real” trauma themselves. Unlike some horror texts where the author intends the audience to undergo only a momentary shudder of art-horror and then return to life as normal, inoculative nonfiction seeks to make the trauma of the text permanent: de Becker wants his readers to become emotionally scarred just enough so they consume the book not merely as artifice, but as a “real” event that is accessible in the future to them as experience. The more “real,” or natural, inoculative nonfiction becomes to the reader, then, theoretically, the more potent the inoculation against future trauma. Just as young couples are counseled to watch childbirth education videos, which hospitals design to be extreme in their depictions of the horrors of what is almost sure to be a loud, painful, and slimy episode of vaginal birth well before the due-date, so does inoculative nonfiction seek to pre-mediate the future trauma of its particular brand of violence through a controlled, yet no less graphic, viewing.

Inoculative Nonfiction and Trauma Studies

One way of illustrating the mechanics of inoculative nonfiction is to examine some of the more prominent methodologies for interpreting trauma. As a first case-study, we will gaze back through trauma studies to one its earlier theorists. Published in 1757, Edmund Burke’s “A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin or Our Ideas of the

Sublime and Beautiful” establishes a basic vocabulary for the fascination of that which is terrible.

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say strongest emotion because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure. (499)

The significance of the Burkean notion of the sublime is that it successfully creates a terminology that begins to articulate and define experiences that are not entirely understandable. The sublime, as differentiated from the beautiful and the picturesque, is something that initiates a failure of comprehension, and primarily corresponds within the category of art(horror). An encounter with the sublime elicits such strong emotions because the psyche is not prepared to deal with the overwhelming nature of the experience it is being presented with: past experience can provide no suitable comparison, and language fails to offer a means of enunciation. More than the unknown, the sublime is something which is indescribable, ineffable, and seemingly unknowable and is a metaphor other theorists frequently employ to describe the mechanism of trauma. Inoculative nonfiction operates with the same apparatus in mind. The author designs the Inoculative text to provide a system of enunciation and historical precedent for future traumatic events that may occur. By labeling and generating—at

least to the degree art-horror one can experienced as natural horror—what is essentially a dark future encounter with the sublime, inoculative nonfiction seeks to preemptively mediate the event by vaccinating the reader with a contrived, yet still terrifying, experience. Though the sublime is, by definition, unknowable, by seeking to accustomize the reader to its inscrutability the text hopes to tame some of the potentially negative side effects of a future encounter.

Next, trauma theorists have yet to escape reckoning with Sigmund Freud (Leys 11). Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* marks one of the first significant attempts at mapping a "psychic disorder that appears to reflect the unavoidable and overwhelming imposition of historical events on the psyche" (Caruth 58). While initially shrugged off by many physicians, the advent of World War I and the widely documented phenomena of "shell shock" and "combat hysteria"—due to the intense trauma of modernized, and more specifically, trench warfare—led to a wider interest of the diagnosis of what Freud called *Nachträglichkeit* (Leys 22). *Nachträglichkeit*, or "deferred action" trauma, is the relationship between two experiences separated by time. The original experience that generates the wound becomes traumatic when compulsively triggered at a later time. The patient reexperiences the memory of the original event, but now with the added negative significance of trauma. Trauma, then, is a "dialectic between two events" and exhibits a delay or latency where the past event is now only available "by a deferred act of understanding and interpretation" (Leys 20). Dominick LaCapra calls this deferment a "dissociation between cognition and affect" and claims that "in traumatic experience one typically can represent numbly or with aloofness what one cannot feel, and one

feels overwhelmingly what one is unable to represent, at least with any critical distance or control" (117).

Returning to a model similar to the Burkean sublime, unlike a typical neurosis in which the patient merely avoids pain or conflict, the traumatic flashback "can only be understood as the absolute inability of the mind to avoid an unpleasant event that has not been given psychic meaning in any way" (Caruth 59). This moment of trauma is not a direct reaction to the original experience of trauma, but is the enigma presented by the patient's survival of the event (Caruth 60). The degree of the trauma to the patient is not caused by any quantity of antagonistic stimulus, but by "fright," which is the consequence of psychological lack of preparation to an overwhelming stimulus that comes too quickly (Caruth 62).

We may, I think, tentatively venture to regard the common neurosis as a consequence of an extensive breach being made in the protective shield against stimuli. [. . .] Fright [is] caused by lack of any preparedness for anxiety. [. . .] It will be seen, then, that preparedness for anxiety and the hypercathexis of the receptive systems constitute the last line of defense of the shield against the stimuli. (Freud *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 35-36)

Essentially what Freud argues here is that without proper mental conditioning, the psyche is unable to fully comprehend certain moments of trauma in a satisfactory manner. The original moment is not traumatic itself; it is the psyche's inability to deal with the moment that causes trauma at a later time. As a result of this, memories of the

past experience are later triggered causing traumatic repetition, often in the form of flashbacks or nightmares. This explains, at least in part, why Freud's soldiers exhibited the greatest amount of traumatic symptoms only *after* they have returned home to their normal lives (Caruth 63).

Dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright. This astonishes people far too little. [. . .] I am not aware, however, that patients suffering from traumatic neurosis are much occupied in their waking lives with memories of their accident. Perhaps they are more concerned with *not* thinking of it. Anyone who accepts it as something self-evident that their dreams should put them back at night into the situation that caused them to fall ill has misunderstood the nature of dreams. (11-12)

It is this notion of traumatic repetition that explains the bulk of Kelly's continued anguish long after the incident occurred.

In *The Gift of Fear*, Kelly ostensibly suffered recurring nightmares and worse as symptoms of her attack. As de Becker maneuvers Kelly through her encounter and post-traumatic stress disorder, he seeks to provide meaning and language for her ordeal, thus ostensibly reducing the need for the past event to rupture violently into the present as neuroses. However, in terms of trauma inoculation for the reader, whether or not de Becker helps Kelly with her problems is entirely irrelevant. De Becker's primary purpose is to fortify the reader's psyche against "a breach being made in the

protective shield against stimuli”; the inoculative text aims to prepare for future anxiety by preemptively exposing the reader to anxiety vicariously through Kelly. The reader, unlike Kelly, has the “critical distance and control” needed to potentially accomplish this feat with minimal psychic damage. The inoculation comes not only from the reader’s encounter with Kelly’s story, but, more importantly, from the author’s exposition and analysis of the events, both implicit and explicit. If Kelly’s current trauma is based on a compulsive irruption of an incomprehensible memory of a past event into the present, then de Becker can identify what systems of enunciation and forms of signification are needed for Kelly’s recuperative therapy and offer them, in advance, to his reader. The inoculation reduces the possibility of a failure of comprehension, since the act of violence is more familiar and has historical precedence. Theoretically, the reader’s mind now has little, or at least less, need for “repeatedly bringing [itself] back into the situation of [its] accident, a situation from which [the subject] wakes up in another fright,” should a similar attack occur. This is because the reader has a point of entry through which to vicariously deal with this scripted encounter with the dark sublime while awake and, at least to some extent, while ready for it.

LaCapra call this process “working-through” trauma, which involves the establishment of various counterforces to combat any actual or potential compulsive repetition of the traumatic event. If trauma is the involuntary irruption of the perceived past into the present, then working-through seeks to prepare the mind for future psychic incursions. Since trauma cannot be erased or healthily repressed, victims can only learn to anticipate the symptoms of trauma and “learn how to live better with its

attendant anxiety” (119). While LaCapra primarily focuses on the prospects of working-through as a strategy for the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder, the implicit assumption of inoculative nonfiction is that it presents the possibility for the completion of the process of working-through in advance, before a potentially traumatizing event occurs. The counterforces against future trauma become vocabulary and vicarious experience, and the reader learns to live with attendant anxiety before it ever happens. It is important to note that none of this suggests that violence should or even can be banalized to the point that the act becomes trivial. Kelly’s rape would surely be a terrible experience no matter what mental preparations were made. What inoculative nonfiction does suggest is that violence can, to at least some varying degree, be prepared for, and the chance of an event turning into future traumatic neuroses can be psychologically minimized or averted.

As E. Ann Kaplan points out, the utility of understanding how audiences can experience trauma second-hand is at a premium in our modern, information-rich society: “Most of us generally encounter trauma vicariously through the media rather than directly. Since such exposure may result in symptoms of secondary trauma, we need to know as much as possible about the process” (87). For example, Kaplan suggests that films that produce vicarious trauma—which, to some degree, is all film—can create a kind of “belatedness of response”; viewers become scarred by viewing disturbing images for which they are not prepared and often demonstrate aversion to viewing comparable images in the future (91). Similarly, a memory, like Kaplan’s notion of traumatic film, is a set of vicariously experienced visual and emotional stimuli that can

create belated responses of trauma. Thus, according to this logic, all trauma is experienced vicariously. LaCapra points out that since trauma is based on a misrecognition or failure of the victim's system of signification, the memory that generates a traumatic episode is inevitably but a twisted distortion of the actual event and not a recurrence of any actual event (116). In sense, all trauma is a form of "postmemory," which is "the acquired memory of those not directly experiencing an event" (108). Therefore, Kelly does not reexperience the event of her rape as trauma, but it is a distorted memory of the event that forms her recurring nightmares; she vicariously relives her own experience through a dubious memory, as this is her only access to the "real" historical event of her rape. Memory's representations of trauma—like representations in fiction, nonfiction, or film—are authentic in the sense that the pain they create is very real, yet the event they purport to relive does not exist as presented. Inoculative nonfiction, then, seeks not to deal with postmemory, but to preemptively create what can be called a "pre-memory": the acquired memory of those not directly experiencing an event but anticipate it may happen in the future.

Pre-memory has several popular homologues other than inoculation, such as the terms desensitization and conditioning, and it seems important at this point to attempt to draw some distinction between them. Medicine and psychology both use desensitization in conjunction with various treatments, such as graduated exposure therapy for the treatment of anxiety. However, as a pejorative term, desensitization is wielded most often by propagandists and, outside the realm of pitchfork-toting censors, seems to have little place in this study. Accustomization to something, even violence

and trauma, does not automatically demand a dulling of the senses or morals, as is often connoted in the lay usage of the term desensitization. For example, repeated readings of Kelly's account of violence does not necessarily equate with a diminished sensibility for the pain of rape as it occurs; however, inoculative nonfiction suggests that once thoroughly inoculated, one may be more likely to be able to successfully deal with its trauma in the future, should a similar situation arise⁶. The term conditioning, however, proves much more portentous, as it conjures both psychology and military science in a productive manner. Athletes may condition their bodies to increase future performance; soldiers and police officers condition themselves to be able to kill in future combat situations; de Becker's readers are conditioned—he hopes—to be able to avoid making life-threatening mistakes in a situation of violence and better deal with future trauma, should violence occur. Conditioning, then, works for our usage, as it connotes a preemptive process of mediation.

Horror and Inoculative Nonfiction

Earlier in my argument I claim that inoculative nonfiction is the next stage in the evolution of the gothic text, and now that I have established a theoretical framework within trauma studies, I can begin to tackle this assertion through a thematic reverse engineering. Syllogistically, the connection is as follows: inoculative nonfiction uses the tropes of horror to expose its audience to trauma and violence, and it shows that exposure to trauma and violence mediates future behavior; thus, the tropes of horror

⁶ Chapter two explains the precise mechanics of this strategy and provides examples of its perceived efficacy.

can be read to mediate future behavior. Since the tropes of horror mediate future behavior, and the horror genre relies on these tropes by definition, then the horror genre too mediates future behavior. Suggesting that inoculative nonfiction can be read as horror is simple; De Becker consciously borrows stylistically from the tropes of horror in order to elicit a powerful emotional response, and *The Gift of Fear* practically begs for the comparison as it loudly proclaims on its back cover that it is “A HOW-TO BOOK THAT READS LIKE A THRILLER” (see chapter two). However, critics may question the degree to which a horror text, particularly a seemingly gratuitous text, can possibly inoculate its audience. Is the endless repetition of horror tropes in fiction and film a pedagogical phenomenon, and do audiences really become inoculated against anything useful by watching episode X of a given slasher film franchise? These questions are perhaps best answered by one of the more popular purveyors of contemporary horror. In an unscripted interview for the documentary *The American Nightmare* (2000), Wes Craven describes his filmmaking ideology:

Kids who are in a much more chaotic state of mind and life than most adults remember or realize, they can go into these [horror films] as kind of boot camps for the psyche, as I have said. Strengthening their egos, strengthening their sense of fortitude; just as a soldier comes, you know, from momma’s arms into the drill instructor’s gaze and ends hardened, but feeling like he can survive battle. I think that’s, in a sense, what goes on with kids that go to scary movies. And it’s something that the grownups never seem to think about; they’re always worried about, “Oh,

the kids have been damaged, the kids have been traumatized.” It’s always been kind of the basis for my sort of optimism about what I do, and of being kind of a right thing, because the kids feel spontaneously grateful for it, even if it gives them nightmares, there’s something going on there that is needed.

Craven’s tremendously successful *Scream* franchise provides an excellent example of how horror operates in an inoculative function. The basic and largely familiar premise of *Scream* and its sequels is that of a masked killer stalking a group of teenagers. However, unlike most other slasher films, both Craven’s protagonists and villains are exceptionally well-versed in the canon of modern horror. They have seen all the traditional horror films, are aware of the major horror texts, and typically know what sorts of things *not* to do; they are richly steeped in what Hills calls “intertextual subcultural capital” (182). This intertextual capital allows them the possibility of avoiding the same mistakes made by the protagonists of their similarly stalked filmic predecessors.

In the neo-stalker film *humorous self-referentiality gives way to serious reflexivity*. The protagonists of these films grow up to attain sober recognition of their plight; there is a moment from “*Wow! This is like one of those stalker movies!*” to “*Shit! We are in one of those stalker movies!*” Those who refuse to get “self-reflexive,” or who do so too late, die horribly. (qtd. in Hills 187, emphasis his)

Scream privileges those with intertextual awareness and punishes those who do not possess it with death. Intertextual (sub)cultural capital, of course, is also homologous with pre-memory; those who do well in *Scream* are both knowledgeable of violence and pre-conditioned from consuming conventional horror media to better deal with it before, during, and after it occurs—or at least better able to understand their failure as it occurs. The characters have not ever previously been stalked themselves, but they know better how to act and respond to their predicament from having watched a stalker in a movie; their increased potential for survival lies in the fact that they have vicariously experienced the trauma to which they are currently exposed. The horror films that provide the basis for the mediation of their trauma are usually lowbrow and gratuitous, yet still prove to be not only useful, but essential to the characters' survival. While some may argue that Craven wrote *Scream* as a shameless self-promotion—he claims to be personally invested in the notion that horror movies contain some greater worth other than mere entertainment value—yet the fact that the popularity of self-reflexive horror films continues to grow suggests, at the very least, that audiences want characters who they can relate to. Viewers identify with *Scream's* characters not merely because of familiar settings, but because they too possess intertextual (sub)cultural capital that mediate their behavior based on the media they consume. Self-serving or not, it seems Craven is right.

Matt Hills claims that “horror’s pleasures must be assumed to be felt, materially and affectively by audiences” (6). While in many cases this assertion is tenable, the discursive, experiential pleasures and pedagogies of horror are independent sociological

operators and have little need for overt reader or author cognition. A text can influence a reader's psychological response or behavior with or without complicity, and likewise, an author can create a text with a powerful pedagogy entirely unintentionally. In the case of *Scream*, for example, the pedagogical apparatus was stalker movies in general, not just movies by Craven; all of the stalker movies, whether they were designed as inoculative or not, provided inoculative material for the character without any need of ostensible authorial intentionality. Even those characters who are not avid fans of horror and had not previously consumed it with a realization of its inoculative potential were still culturally aware of the general pitfalls of the genre: even someone who hates horror as a genre is likely aware of its clichés and conventions and is still subject to a partial inoculation.

It is also important to note that any inoculative reading of a potentially horrific text does not come at the cost of its pleasure. I suggest that my thesis neither challenges nor is mutually exclusive with most of the scholarship surrounding horror and trauma studies. Neither does the fact that a novel or film can be read as inoculative hinder or displace any of its aesthetic entertainment value. Whether or not a society is masochistic for, in many cases, enjoying the trauma vaccination process and voluntarily (re)submitting to it every Friday night at the movies is not the focus of the essay, but, as Col. Dave Grossman points out in the inoculative *On Killing*, the fact that the same types of wildly popular first-person shooter video games are used to train soldiers to be

successful in combat illustrates how media inoculation can be simultaneously aesthetically pleasurable and unintentionally informative⁷.

As Craven puts it, horror is a “boot camp for the psyche” in the sense that it often presents a challenging, abrasive regimen—in its particular case, it is frequently a course in death and violence. For Craven, this vicarious exposure to potentially traumatic imagery facilitates the development of a greater preparedness for similar situations the viewer may someday experience. Therefore, even a seemingly mindless horror text can be read to function with a similar pedagogy in operation; it will, to some varying degree, serve to inoculate its audience and mediate its future exposure to trauma. Inoculative nonfiction, then, can be seen as a new stage in the development of the gothic text; it draws upon familiar stylistic and narrative devices adopted by the horror canon to tell its story and eagerly seeks comparison with gothic sensibilities. The primary difference, its evolutionary variation, is that inoculative nonfiction privileges exposition and analysis over the narration itself. It too offers the reader a boot camp for the psyche, and its aims are even loftier than Craven’s. Even though reading through the account of Kelly’s rape and attempted murder is repulsive and disturbing, “there is something going on there that is needed”: horror develops intertextual (sub)cultural

⁷ See Chapter 2. Grossman, an ex-Ranger, is outraged by this and rails against the video game industry for inoculating kids the same way the military inoculates troops before combat; both groups, he argues, are “enabled” by media to kill. See also Grossman’s *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (1997), *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill : A Call to Action Against TV, Movie and Video Game Violence* (1999), and *On Combat: The Psychology and Physiology of Deadly Conflict in War and in Peace* (2004).

capital, forges pre-memories, generates critical distance and control, and fortifies against breaches of incomprehensible stimuli in the psyche's protective shield.

Finally, in addition to my previous disclaimers, I must mention the fact that any inoculative reading of art-horror is not without some methodological problems; specifically, not all art-horror inoculates equally well. Also, not everyone responds the same way to a given text or emotion; what may be inoculative or merely fun to one person may be, in fact, debilitatingly traumatic to another. However, this paradox of a non-universal response fits neatly into the analogy of vaccination and serves to bolster the tenability of the argument. A real vaccination can have varying degrees of success or failure on a patient; it can even sometimes cause violent allergic reactions—some people claim they cause autism. If the target virus of a vaccination is not properly neutralized, the patient can inadvertently become infected during the inoculation process. A vaccination should be administered at the proper time, and not when someone is too sick or weak. Age is also an important factor, as some vaccines are not suitable for the fragile immune systems of very young children. Though the specific response is different among patients, depending on many of the dynamic factors I have outlined, in nearly every case the patient's body will be affected in the future by the inoculation received. I argue that such is the case with trauma and violence in the media. Horrific or traumatic texts have various affects on their audiences, and the degree to which future behavior will be influenced is varied, yet certainly real. This reading is highly productive with many texts, though certainly not all, and does not claim to be a panacea for understanding horrific or traumatic media. As I mentioned

earlier, though, the fact that all texts have the potential to generate vicarious trauma via the pre-memory structure demands the need for further investigation into the precise mechanics of how this inoculation process operates within a text and what it can enable a reader to do.

CHAPTER TWO: VACCINATING HUMANITY WITH HORROR AND VIOLENCE

Taking the surprise out of combat, raising the sense of confidence, and cognitively preparing the warrior for battle is one of the primary objectives of this book. Thus, this book can be seen as a form of stress inoculation, and the reduction in surprise and the increase in confidence provided within these pages will hopefully reduce the stress of combat.

(Grossman *On Combat* 36)

In 1997 a literary anomaly surfaced on the radar of bestseller lists across the country. Gavin de Becker, a freelance criminologist of sorts, published *The Gift of Fear* and it rapidly became an international sensation. This number one bestseller is unique for several reasons: it is a self-help book about violence, it is quite graphic and disturbing, and its prose can only be described as highly mediocre at best. Propelled by a paranoid television watching public disturbed at the sudden death of Princess Diana and by a perceived rise in “random” violent acts within the domestic sphere, de Becker was quickly sought out for advice and sound bytes and became a popular media icon. Gathering a farrago of endorsements from Oprah Winfrey, Marcia Clark, and Meryl Streep, de Becker’s text is a thematic and literary conundrum: “a how-to book that reads like a thriller” (*Gift Back Cover*). *The Gift of Fear* takes its reader step by step through graphic accounts of rape, murder, and revenge, with each story serving to provide insights into his major argument that claims violent behavior can be predicted, and therefore averted or confronted. Short accounts of terror and trauma fill de Becker’s book, which are written as “thrillers” for several ostensible reasons. First, the

reader's attention is inevitably seized, and on an aesthetic level, the book provides for the same socio-cultural experience of reading or watching a horror text. Second, since de Becker preaches that knowledge is power, by exposing his readers to what he describes as true events (this could happen to you!), he generates a self-sustaining market for his non-fiction, as he is the primary purveyor of this knowledge. Third, and most importantly to de Becker, the readers, and this study, is the fact that by exposing his reader to trauma and violence, he claims that his readers can better prepare to deal with that same trauma in the future—if and when they are exposed to it. In short, de Becker's book claims to be an inoculation against future trauma.

De Becker's three texts—*The Gift of Fear: Survival Signals That Protect Us from Violence* (1997), *Protecting the Gift: Keeping Children and Teenagers Safe* (2000), and *Fear Less: Real Truth About Risk, Safety, and Security in a Time of Terrorism* (2002)—and Lt. Colonel Dave Grossman's two primary texts—*On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (1997), and *On Combat: The Psychology and Physiology of Deadly Conflict in War and in Peace* (2004)—are the pioneers of this popular new genre. While *The Gift of Fear* is the most popular in its class, it is only one of a small but rapidly growing group of books designed to train readers to deal with trauma before it happens. The most critically lauded of these books is Grossman's *On Killing*, which was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and claims to have invented an entire new field of academic inquiry: "killology." In many aspects, Grossman's book is also written like a thriller as he explores military history and its attendant trauma through often extremely graphic vignettes of violence and atrocity for the purpose of both

helping to palliate and understand the extant trauma of soldiers who have experienced combat and to help prepare those who may experience violent trauma in the future. These books are serving to seed a new generation of ultra-specialized texts designed to prepare policemen, soldiers, martial artists, and housewives to deal with future trauma through physiological, psychological, and what can best be described as literary conditioning.

While the previous chapter introduced the genre of inoculative nonfiction and sought to contextualize it within a framework of trauma and horror studies, in this chapter I will more closely analyze the genre of inoculative nonfiction itself and explore various recurring conventions, establish a common pedagogical structure, and examine its efficacy. Inoculative nonfiction's recent popularity among civilian and uniformed demographics adopts a wide range of approaches and draws from a diverse canon. For this study, I will focus my attention on three of its most commercially successful texts: de Becker's *the Gift of Fear*, Grossman's *On Killing*, and *On Combat*. While any number of inoculative texts might adequately serve the purposes of this analysis, these three particular texts continue to garner the most publicity, the highest critical acclaim, and largest audience and thus serve as premier examples of prototypes of the genre.

"A How-To Book That Reads Like a Thriller"

There are numerous types of stress inoculation employed by various professions, explains Grossman, and all use different tools and devices to protect people against future danger.

Firefighters are inoculated against fire. Sailors are inoculated against sinking ships by placing them in compartments that flood with water as they fight to repair simulated damage. Many individuals are inoculated against heights through rappelling and rock climbing. (*On Combat* 38)

Inoculative nonfiction's first fundamental tool for inoculation is the exacerbation of textual trauma through (hyper)dramatic narrative. Rape-survivor Kelly in *The Gift of Fear* sets a dark, sensationalized tone right from page one that immediately suggests one response from the reader—this is not your grandmother's how-to book. Continuing my discussion from the previous chapter, de Becker's retelling of Kelly's ordeal is unlikely to win him any awards for style, but the audacity of the text is startling; since de Becker's vignette is concerned with what is potentially one of the most taboo and disturbing events in Western culture—violent rape—at first glance, it seems counterintuitive that he does not downplay the vividness of Kelly's imminent trauma. Instead, de Becker seeks to not only elaborate, but to amplify the trauma of the text by providing the length in pages, details, and pathos required for his readers to almost inevitably begin to connect and sympathize with the victim.

She closed the door behind her, pushing it until she heard it latch. She is certain she locked it, which means he must have already been inside the corridor. Next came the four flights of stairs, which she wanted to do in one trip. Near the top of the third landing, one of the bags gave way, tearing open and dispensing cans of cat food. They rolled down the stairs almost playfully, as if trying to get away from her. [. . .] At this point, as

she is telling me the story of the rape and the whole three-hour ordeal she suffered, Kelly pauses to weep quietly. She knows that he killed one of his other victims, stabbed her to death. All the while, since soon after we sat down knee to knee in the small garden outside my office, Kelly has been holding both my hands. She is twenty-seven years old. Before the rape, she was a counselor for disturbed children, but she hasn't been back in a long while. (1, 3)

De Becker is quick to identify what behavioral warning signs Kelly ignored, what was wrong with her response, and how one might prevent a similar event in the future; the case study of Kelly's attack provides context for the theoretical application of de Becker's inoculative strategies. The purpose of Kelly's story within the text provides a harrowing example of what *not* to do—Kelly makes several unfortunate decisions that effectually allow the would-be killer into her apartment and the rape to occur—so that the reader can hopefully analyze and learn from them⁸. However, a lack of proper stylistic packaging would likely compromise the success of de Becker's inoculation. The reason *The Gift of Fear* seeks to exacerbate the trauma of Kelly's attack is ostensibly for pedagogical reasons: for the simulation to be effective, it needs to feel real and, in a

⁸ While pedagogically effective in many ways, this strategy can be problematic and possibly harmful: implying to the rape victim that the attack was her fault can certainly exacerbate extant guilt and trauma. However, de Becker does not primarily work with people to alleviate PTSD; he works with clients to facilitate the prevention of future violence. In the case of Kelly, she wants de Becker to teach her how she could potentially avoid this sort of incident in the future. At this point in this dialogue, Kelly is ostensibly psychologically ready to openly discuss the event, and she is willing to analyze her actions for dangerous behaviors. If she was not properly prepared, the results of this conversation between her and de Becker could have been disastrous.

hopefully controlled manner, actually traumatize the reader. De Becker could tell Kelly's story in a fraction of the time and without most of the extraneous details; he could easily distill the six-page story into a short paragraph, had he wanted to. Instead, de Becker sensationalizes the account and attempts to traumatize the reader through the text. While Kelly is now a "veteran" of the trauma of rape herself, by vicariously experiencing Kelly's trauma to some degree, the text creates in its audience what Grossman calls "'pre-battle veterans,' individuals with the survival skills of a veteran warrior but without the tragic cost of real combat" (*On Combat* 134).

Though typically less sensationalized in its approach, Grossman's texts function similarly in their rhetorical operation. Traveling frequently to give lectures to military and law enforcement agencies, Grossman retells combat stories from the people he meets or quotes them from personal correspondence. In most cases, the narrative is in a first person voice and seeks to create a sense of perceived realism for the reader; to create pre-battle veterans, the text employs the gritty testimonies of "real" veterans. Grossman's goals of inoculation are broad, as he seeks to vicariously expose his readership to the trauma of combat; *On Combat* begins by preparing the audience for various non-lethal human physiological responses. For example, Grossman wants to prepare his readers for "condition black," a stage of reaction to incredible stress where the body floods with adrenaline and normal motor control and memory rapidly declines. Since most intellectual abilities of the brain will shut down at condition black, in order to function appropriately under such conditions the trainee must act almost solely on hard-wired reflexes,

Let me tell you how powerful this autopilot business is. I came around the corner of this guy's van; I'm just going to tell him to move it. I didn't realize that he'd already killed one person. You honestly don't know you're doing it. All of a sudden a gun appears in his hand. Then a hole appears in his chest and the guy drops. My first thought was, "Whoa, somebody shot him for me!" I actually looked over my shoulder to see who shot this guy. Then I realized I had my gun in my hand and it was me who had shot him. (qtd. in *On Combat* 74)

The first-hand account from a veteran police-officer reinforces Grossman's theoretical concept, and the reader may be able to vicariously share in some of the trauma experienced by the storyteller. In other sections of the texts, the brutality and length of the textual trauma is increased to account for the need of a "stronger" vaccination. While teaching readers about dealing with "the full spectrum of atrocity" on the battlefield, Grossman quotes a four-page combat nightmare from a U.N. peacekeeping soldier deployed in the Congo in 1963. While on patrol, the teenage man comes across "two naked black men torturing a young white woman [. . .] assumed to be a nun or teacher" (*On Killing* 217). In terrible, meticulous detail the soldier describes the horror of the scene upon his arrival and of his discovery of the second, older nun who lies mutilated against the wall. This particular story is probably the most gruesome and disturbing narrative in all the canon of mainstream inoculative nonfiction. The section is especially traumatic, as its event are so far removed from most people's lives that many civilians may disbelieve it—the story is too terrible, the actions are too cruel.

And this, Grossman argues is why the reader must hear the story: “[People’s] goodness and decency [. . .] cause them to be so completely incapable of believing that someone or something [. . .] could be so evil” (212). Perhaps, he suggests, the denial of atrocity by good, decent people is tied to our inherent resistance to killing in the first place.

Though, he continues, “We must not permit ourselves to be attracted to it. Nor can we, in our revulsion, ignore it. Ultimately the purpose of this section, and of this study, has been to look at the ugliest aspect of war, that we might know, name it, and confront it” (227).

This methodology suggests, then, that the more traumatizing a text is, the more effective it is at helping readers achieve “veteran” status. However, inoculative texts must skirt the line between theoretical efficacy—the more traumatic the better—and audience approachability— since most people do not want to read something that is too disturbing or initiates too much trauma. If the text is too repellent, then people will not read it and no inoculation can occur. Like a medical vaccine, it is the individual needs of the patient that determine the correct dosage. This helps explain why Grossman’s texts are considerably bloodier and more horrific in their depictions of violence than de Becker’s, since Grossman primarily writes to military and law enforcement personnel that are already assumed to be somewhat “hardened,” while de Becker writes typically to civilian women and mothers. As Grossman points out, preemptive trauma mediation is not an exact science: “Stress inoculation is not perfect, and to get a useful degree of protection it has to be precisely applied. Last year’s flu vaccine is of limited value this year [. . .] and a firefighter’s inoculation against fire is of little use to him if people shoot

at him" (*On Combat* 39). Since prescribing the perfect dose of psychic textual damage for everyone in one book is impossible, it seems these authors typically strategically choose to err on the side of too much, while trying to not lose complete palatability from their target demographic. After all, "PTSD can be a step on the path to stress inoculation and [. . .] one can be stronger when they [sic] come to the other end" (*On Combat* 298). This somewhat problematizes Grossman's earlier call for precision in the inoculation process, but on the other hand Grossman writes primarily for soldiers and police officers—a group he feels needs all the inoculation they can get—and is, perhaps erroneously so, not particularly concerned about his text falling into the hands of people it might scar beyond repair.

One way of diagramming a pedagogical context for inoculative nonfiction is to establish a continuum of trauma training efficiency (see Table 1). At the core of each inoculative nonfiction text is a set of theoretical principles the author wishes to teach that will purportedly help the audience in the future, should violence arise. For example, in *The Gift of Fear* de Becker wants to teach his female readers that when a male ignores the word "No" in a potentially dangerous setting, they should consider it a serious warning sign and prepare to take evasive or defensive action. De Becker can communicate this through the medium of a text through various rhetorical devices. In the first stage of the efficiency continuum is a mere theoretical description of the principle in abstract form. More effective would be to offer the abstract principle while providing a practical "real life" example. Inoculative nonfiction seeks to go beyond either stage and achieve further efficiency by packaging the theoretical principle in

(hyper)dramatic narrative. By making the example frightening, shocking, or repelling the author can sear the abstract theory into the reader's mind through a traumatically unforgettable art-horror experience. Eliciting many, if not all, of the same physiological and mental responses of natural horror, the reader is now inoculated and better prepared to face the future.

Table 1

A Continuum of Trauma Training Efficiency

Stage	Application in <i>The Gift of Fear</i>
1. Abstraction	Don't let someone ignore the word "No"
2. The Practical Example	A bland generic "textbook" example
3. Dramatic Narrative in Fiction in Film	Kelly's sensationalized account of rape
4. High Stress Live Drill	De Becker suggests full force martial arts training of a rape scenario

De Becker is quick to admit that the one thing more effective than his books is role-playing—preferably “full contact self-defense training [. . .] using padded instructors who pose as assailants” (385). This, however, is not likely an easy product to sell to his housewife constituency, and neither is it essential to the inoculation process. Inoculation can successfully occur on any of the stages; the various stages appeal to different styles of learning and need and usually work best when combined. De Becker, for one, seems quite content walking his readers through stages one through three and only offers a passing reference to stage four and relegates its details to his supplemental

appendix. Grossman is more readily able to discuss and promote high stress, “live” training to his uniformed readers in the form of paintball and other activities designed to wrack the nerves, induce real physical pain, and create a situation nearly identical to the potential future scenario of violence, only just barely avoiding the “tragic cost of real combat.” Ironically, Grossman also explains that the military intentionally designs some extreme training drills, such as Army Ranger school and Navy SEAL school, to be far tougher and actually more traumatic than anything a typical soldier will ever likely experience, even in wartime: he describes a soldier during the Vietnam war who, while under heavy enemy fire, turns to his companion and says, “Well hell, at least we’re not in Ranger school” (*On Combat* 132).

Outside the realm of how-to books, the memes of inoculative art as a social experience are not without numerous counterparts in Western culture. Psychodrama, for example, is a method that explores psychological and social problems by having participants role-play potentially traumatic scenarios under the supervision of a therapist. Recognizing that merely talking or reading about trauma is often not enough, psychodrama sessions seek to “purify” the role-players through a form of the Aristotelian notion of catharsis. The father of modern psychodrama, Jacob Moreno, explains that Aristotle wrote that drama could purify its audience by “artistically exciting certain emotions which act as a kind of homeopathic relief from their own selfish passions” (209). However, Moreno explains that it is primarily the actors who receive the benefits of a cathartic purgation. Psychodrama, then, focuses on involving its participants as much as possible and turns spectators into actors:

The more the spectator is able to accept the emotions, the roles and the developments on the stage as corresponding to his own private feelings, private roles and private developments, the more thoroughly will his attention and his phantasy be carried away by the performance. The paradox is, however, that he is identifying himself with something with which he is not identical: the hero on the stage is not he, himself. The spectator can sympathize with acts which take place on the stage just as if they were his own acts, but they are not his; he can experience with the actors all the pain and the torture. [. . .] The degree to which the spectator can enter into the life upon the stage, adjusting his own feeling to what is portrayed there, is the measure of the catharsis he is able to obtain on this occasion. (255-6)

For Aristotle and Moreno, catharsis is not so much inoculative as it is a means to maintain psychic “balance” and “equilibrium,” but this is largely a matter of timing. If one consumes or engages in cathartic drama before “disequilibrium” occurs, the drama pre-mediates the future traumatic event. Contemporary psychodrama follows a similar pattern for training efficiency as the model I outlined earlier. *Practical Approaches to Dramatherapy* (2000) contrasts the harsh approach of “flooding” —plunging a patient “right into the middle of whatever it is that appalls and terrifies them and so learns the hard way that they are able to survive it even at its worst” —with the much more desirable option of psychodrama.

The other method is much gentler and consists of introducing the person to the loathed presence by a process of carefully graded steps, beginning perhaps with simply talking about it, then looking at pictures, handling something closely associated with it [. . .] until the person is used not only to the idea but also to the actual presence of whatever it was that used to throw them into such inner turmoil. (27)

With role-playing as a final step, the patient slowly builds up a tolerance via the experience of catharsis, thus maximizing the efficiency of the dramatherapy. While inoculative nonfiction does not necessarily want the reader to become “used to” trauma and violence, it does seek to obtain the ability to maintain equilibrium under duress.

Psychodrama, like inoculative nonfiction, places great emphasis on exposition, as Adam Blatner explains in *Foundations of Psychodrama* (2000): “Activating emotion shouldn’t be the goal. [. . .] The need for follow up is needed, though, so that integration is ensured” (116). Here the word “integration” becomes yet another homologue for inoculation. When Grossman shocks his readers by offering the grisly first-hand account of the U.N. peacekeeper in Congo, he hopes the reader will be “carried away by the performance” and “enter into” the narrative to increase the level of catharsis; whether by vicariously experiencing (art-horror) or role-playing the events of the drama of the text (art/natural horror), the trauma cathartically “integrates” itself into the reader’s psyche. Grossman must also be as precise as possible with the dosage of violence, since “Mental catharsis cannot be reproduced wholesale [. . .] to meet all the situations and relationships in which there may exist some cause for disequilibrium

within a person. It has to be applied concretely and specifically” (Moreno 228). The fact that dramatic representation in literature falls so high on the scale of trauma training efficiency has several startling implications, the most important of which is related to the second fundamental tool of inoculative nonfiction: by depicting violence and killing through a textual medium, inoculative nonfiction seeks to psychologically arm its readers and enable them to commit violence and kill.

Awakening Your Inner Sheepdog: Enabling Yourself to Kill Through Textual Conditioning

Constructing a pre-memory and establishing various counterforces for the pre-mediation of trauma through art-horror is effective, but Grossman and de Becker realize that the avoidance of trauma may not be enough; to avoid receiving violence, some situations may require the ability to commit violence or even kill, and it is at this point that the more radical nature of inoculative nonfiction comes into play. Though some people selectively breed pit-bulls for sociopathy to ensure they can perform the unnatural act of killing another pit-bull in a fight, breeding to overcome humanity’s resistance to killing is not a viable option. However, Grossman argues, killing is sometimes deemed a necessity and humans have developed technology to overcome their limitations. “From a combat evolution perspective, the history of warfare can be viewed as a series of successfully more effective tactical and mechanical mechanisms to enable or force combatants to overcome their resistance to killing” (*On Combat* 200). If the end goal of inoculative nonfiction is to facilitate reader survival in the event of a dangerous or traumatic episode, and beyond that, to ensure the ability to successfully negotiate the event with minimal subsequent psychological debilitation, with stakes this

high it should not be surprising when de Becker and Grossman's pedagogy advocates readers to defend themselves by any means necessary. Once taught how to mentally prepare for situations of trauma and violence, the second fundamental key of inoculative nonfiction is the enabling of physical defense mechanisms, usually in the form of aggressive violence, which the authors hope will come in part from exposure to their (hyper)dramatic narrative. Eschewing pacifism for the capacity of self-defense, the text seeks safety through the enabling of one's personal potential for violence: "The worst thing in the world is Barney Fife with a bullet in his gun: 'Oh god! I might have to kill him!' The correct response is this: "I think I'm going to have to kill this guy. I knew it might come to this someday" (*On Combat* 147).

While most of the conclusions and premises presented by inoculative nonfiction are the result of inductive reasoning, the genre relies on the fact there is little debate left as to the utility of specifically training soldiers to kill people and not just targets. Soldiers that merely receive training on how to shoot will inevitably be very poor soldiers. One of the most startling statistics Grossman presents is the incredibly low historic firing rates of soldiers, as described in a study conducted by U.S. Army Brigadier General S.L.A. Marshall. During World War II, Marshall first learned just how unprepared their soldiers were to successfully fight and kill in battle: only 15 to 20 percent of all soldiers "would take any part with their weapons [. . .] whether the action was spread over a day, or two days or three" (*On Killing* 3). The reasons for nonfiring are numerous, but the primary reason is that the soldiers were not mentally prepared to be able to kill in combat. Since Marshall, other comparable studies continue to find

similar instances of nonfiring throughout most of non-contemporary warfare. During the American Civil War, for example, after the battle of Gettysburg, approximately 90 percent (about twenty-four thousand) of the muskets recovered from the battlefield were found fully loaded. Twelve thousand of the muskets were double-loaded, while six thousand had from three to ten rounds loaded in the barrel. “The obvious conclusion is that most soldiers were not trying to kill the enemy” (22). Tactics have changed since these conflicts: during the Korean War soldiers reached an estimated 55 percent firing rate, and during the Vietnam War they achieved an unprecedented 90 to 95 percent rate (181). The difference, Grossman suggests, lies not in the combat conditions or the enemy, but almost solely in the training.

Instead of lying prone on a grassy field calmly shooting at a bull’s-eye target, the modern soldier spends many hours standing in a foxhole, with full combat equipment draped about his body. [. . .] At periodic intervals one or two olive-drab, man-shaped targets at varying ranges will pop up in front of him for brief time, and the soldier must instantly shoot at the target(s). When he hits the target it provides immediate feedback by instantly and very satisfyingly dropping backwards—just as a living target would. (253)

Some sniper training courses now use balloons filled with red paint or heads of cabbage with ketchup on top; all these changes serve to dramatically increase the chances a soldier will successfully engage the enemy in combat with the intent to kill (244-5).

For inoculative nonfiction to succeed in its goal to protect and prepare its readers, it must also in some way enable them to defend themselves, should the situation require it; the text tries to achieve this rhetorically through accustomization to violence as a practical option and the familiarization of positively-connoted examples of perceived justified violence. Many irresponsibly deem this tactic as “desensitization,” as I discussed in the previous chapter, yet the complexities of training someone to commit violence or kill through a text demands a much more complicated and nuanced approach than any mere dulling of the senses. In fact, hypersensitivity to the sight of blood or the concept of killing someone in general, even an attacker, is not the problem these texts try to address; the difficulty inoculative nonfiction must overcome is the instinctive human resistance to violence and killing in relation *to proximity*.

Grossman best illustrates this as he describes the intense psychological resistance to killing nearly all people experience in close-range combat. Bomber pilots, he argues, very rarely suffer post-traumatic stress disorder following a tour of duty, due to the extreme range between themselves and their victims. He describes how one of the pilots who bombed Dresden, one of most terrible scenes of destruction in the history of modern war, wrote, “we were at 20,000 feet! [. . .] I saw no streets, no outlines of buildings [. . .] Above the city was a misty red haze. I looked down, fascinated but aghast, satisfied yet horrified” (*On Killing* 101). The bomber pilot was virtually unscarred; for him, he was not killing people with faces and families, he was bombing a generic cloudy landscape—the distance between the killer and the victim absolved nearly all potential trauma. While there are certainly exceptions to this

guideline—not all bombardiers sleep trauma-free or perform their duties all the time—Grossman claims that this group of people is definitely part of a small minority. This scenario is then compared to the intense resistance experienced by soldiers and civilians attempting to kill at the hand-to-hand level. Action movies, he writes, are seldom short on hand-to-hand combat and killing; however, very rarely do you ever see someone kill with their bare hands. If they do, it is generally through strangulation or by the snapping of the neck. Grossman argues that every martial artist and soldier knows that neither of these tactics is sensible in a real combat situation—with a live target, necks are not easy to snap and throats are not easy to choke. Instead, soldiers are often trained to *punch* to the throat or, even better, to punch “a thumb through his eye and on into the brain, subsequently stirring the intruding digit around inside the skull, cocking it off toward the side, and forcefully pulling the eye and other matter out with the thumb” (*On Killing* 131-2). This move, while one of the most technically simple among a martial arts repertoire—almost any person of any shape or size can successfully perform the maneuver effectively— is, however, nigh unto impossible to bring oneself to perform, due to its extremely repellent nature. If Jackie Chan began ripping people’s eyeballs out in his next action-comedy, his audience—though action movie buffs—would be horrified and shocked. Yet, for matters of practical self-defense, rigorous and systematically training can overcome this instinctive resistance. Grossman describes how one karate instructor

trains high-level students in this killing technique by having them practice punching their thumbs into oranges held or taped over the eye sockets of

an opponent. [. . .] the process is made even more realistic by having the victim scream, twitch, and jerk as the killer punches his thumb into the orange and then rips it back out. Few individuals can walk away from their first such rehearsal without being badly shaken and disturbed. (*On Killing* 132)

One of the primary reasons de Becker and Grossman seek to traumatize readers through graphic narration is to break through the natural resistance readers likely have towards violence, which therefore enables them to commit violence for purposes of self-defense. De Becker, for example, wants to train Kelly and his readers to be able to defend themselves against future attack at any cost. Grossman wants to train his readers to be able to kill in combat so that they are themselves not killed; in order for either to be successful, the reader must cross certain thresholds of psychological resistance and break various cultural taboos. Since the medium of teaching in these texts is not a martial arts studio with the luxury of stand-in attackers, the oranges in the eyes become graphic narrations designed to lightly singe the reader's psyche, yet burn just deep enough to be able to leave a lasting and empowering impression. As Wes Craven points out earlier, horror, or in this case inoculative nonfiction, is a kind of "boot camp for the psyche" and its aims are self-fortification and empowerment: "even if it gives them nightmares, there's something going on there that is needed." A diagram of the rhetorical strategies of inoculative nonfiction might appear according the following simplified model:

Table 2

A Pedagogical Model of Inoculative Nonfiction

	Rhetorical Strategy	Effect on Reader
1	Dramatic narration	Seizes the reader's attention
2	Narration contains deliberately traumatizing material; the reader is brought into "proximity" with traumatizing material	Heightens the reader's faculty of slightly scars the psyche
3	Exposition and analysis	Explores and explains trauma to prevent its future impact
4	The trauma vaccination conditions the reader and preemptively mediates future experience	When real life trauma occurs, the conditioning mediates the experience in some way

For de Becker, this process occurs textually as he relates stories of women who fight back successfully against attackers with extreme violence. In one instance, he describes an otherwise peaceful, timid housewife who hospitalizes a male attacker twice her size with one arm while defending her small daughter at her side. As de Becker narrates the story, he identifies specific strategies for violence and offers a clear logic for why it works:

Holly was thinking: *I don't want to stick a key into someone's eye. I don't want to hurt him that badly. On the other hand, he obviously plans to hurt me, and I have to protect Kate [her daughter]. If I stick a key in his eye, he'll stop this, but I really don't want to blind a person. Obviously*

though, I'm not going to let him hurt Kate. All this thinking was moot.

That's because as Holly was going over her options, it turns out she already *had* stuck the key into the man's eye, and already had placed it into the ignition. (*Protecting* 4-5)

De Becker praises the woman's valor and assures the reader that this was not only the right thing to do, but that they *can* and *must* do the same thing themselves. This graphic account serves not only to inoculate readers to more successfully deal with this sort of attack, should it occur to them, by eliminating at least some of the potential surprise—the reader will hopefully be more able to anticipate a similar situation since she has now experienced it vicariously through the text—but it also serves to validate violence to the previously nonviolent reader. "*You attack me when I'm with my little girl, and you get the natural consequence.* In fact, she thought the man got away lucky because she could have stuck him in both eyes. That's when she realized she *had* stuck him in both eyes" (5). By providing positively-connoted examples of violence, de Becker justifies what the reader might otherwise consider unspeakable acts of brutality and killing; he shows his reader that it is okay to maim or kill if it is self-defense, and he offers numerous examples as proof. In theory, this emotionally and psychologically fortifies the reader and hopefully better enables them to survive future attack by justifying and legitimizing the possibility of violence. If the reader chooses, de Becker can now refer to a place where they can reinforce the lessons and "boost" the inoculation through a live training drill—though de Becker certainly intends his text to be sufficiently pragmatic that this is not mandatory.

Grossman is able to provide a more sophisticated model of the process of mid-crisis trauma absolution, which he calls the “diffusion of responsibility,” meaning the removal of one’s natural resistance to killing, especially killing at close-range. The potential killer (which here is a positively-connoted description used for the reader) must draw upon various social and psychological constructions in order to perpetrate an act of the violence. First, the killer can draw upon the demands of an authority figure; if the order to kill comes from someone else and is not a decision made by the killer, the mind can more easily justify it. In de Becker’s case, he presents himself as the authority figure and orders his readers to attack in self-defense. The proximity of the authority figure is important, the closer the better, and de Becker’s must overcome his lack of geographic closeness by appealing to several other factors: respect, intensity, and legitimacy. Though de Becker is not there with the mother ordering her to defend her child, if he can “bond” with his readers and earn their respect in advance of the traumatic event, his chances of “gaining compliance” to his order to kill is significantly increased. Also, by repeating the order numerous times in an urgent fashion throughout the text de Becker seeks to create momentum and make his order difficult to disobey. And finally, “Leaders with legitimate, societally sanctioned [sic] authority have greater influence on their soldiers.” As a businessman, it is in de Becker’s best interest on every level to establish his legitimacy; for example, celebrity and “expert” endorsements cover his books, he mentions how he contracts for the government, and he makes many other such appeals that seek to establish his credibility. If he can

convince his readers that he is a legitimate authority figure, then they are much more likely to obey his order to commit violence in self-defense (*On Killing* 144-45).

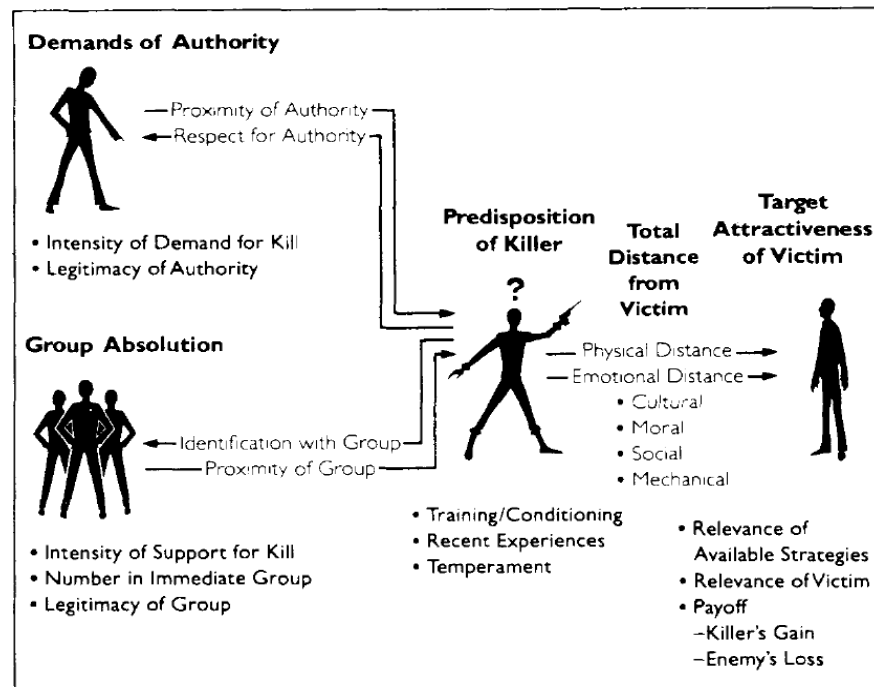


Fig. 1. "An Anatomy of Killing" from Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (New York: Back Bay, 1995) 142.

Second is group absolution. Grossman claims recent military research suggests that "what motivates a soldier to do the things that no sane man *wants* to do in combat (that is, combat and dying) is not the force of self-preservation but a powerful sense of accountability to his comrades on the battlefield" (*On Killing* 149). In their times, the chariot, the phalanx, the cannon, and the machine gun dominated the battlefield. These weapons and tactics succeeded because they involved readily available support groups that not only served to provide peer-pressure to motivate performance, but "if a soldier feels he is letting his friends down if he doesn't kill [. . .] then killing can be easier" (153). For de Becker and the case of the lone mother and child, employing this

device is easy. The support group is primarily composed of the mother's family, and de Becker makes it very clear that if the mother refuses to commit violence as he orders, her group of comrades, her children and family, will pay the ultimate price.

The possible influence a group or, in de Becker's case, a total stranger can have on a reader may seem dubious at first, but Grossman presents compelling evidence that supports his claim. Aside from examples such as Charles Manson and Jim Jones, who both had a considerable amount of time to train their followers to commit violent acts, Grossman cites the chilling "Milgram Study" conducted at Yale University in 1963. Designed to test the level of obedience people would maintain to an authority figure, the test was a harrowing experience for all involved. First, a stranger in a white lab coat offers money to volunteers if they will sit in room at the controls of what they think is an electro-shock machine; in the neighboring room is another person, an actor, who pretends to hook himself up to the machine. The man in the white coat then asks a series of questions to the actor, and the volunteer is ordered to administer an electric shock for each wrong answer given. Though the shocks start small at first, the volunteer is ordered by the man in white lab coat to increase the voltage after each question. Soon, the actor in the other room begins to scream and beg for mercy; however, the man in the white lab coat orders the volunteer to continue shocking him, even after the actor ostensibly quits screaming and is dead, since silence is considered to be a wrong answer. "How many people [. . .] do you think were willing to shock a fellow human being to death just because some guy in a white lab coat told them to? The shocking answer is that 65 percent were willing. [. . .] Now if a guy with a white lab coat can make

65 percent of all human beings kill another person [. . .] what can people with real trappings of authority do? What can a military commander do?" (*On Combat* 206). What then, one may infer, can de Becker do to the lone woman whose child is in immediate danger after she reads all 405 pages of his book? It is important to note that although this particular example may seem negative as used in Grossman's text, I use it here as a neutral example of the power of influence an authority figure can have, for "good" or otherwise, on a human being. In short, it is a reiteration of Freud's warning that people should "never underestimate the need to obey" (qtd. in *On Killing* 142).

Third is the creation of emotional distance from killer's victim. Most people experience less resistance if asked to kill an animal than a human, particularly an ugly animal or one that is considered a pest—for example, you can readily buy bug-killing products at the grocery store, but not people-killing products. Thus, dehumanizing an enemy may avert much of the natural resistance most people feel about killing humans and enable violence against them; this is why soldiers often do not speak of fighting "people" in combat scenarios and instead frequently use disparaging epithets. Emotionally, it is one thing to kill a group of humans, and another completely to fry a bunch of gooks; the enemy is culturally presented as "inferior" and "less than human: the stupidity of local customs is ridiculed, local personalities are presented as evil demigods" (161). If properly trained through the text, de Becker's lone mother can instantly activate this mechanism in a time need. The thing attacking her and her child is no man with a wife and kids of his own; it is a filthy monster, a murderer, white trash, and a scum bag. Whether or not these descriptions are even remotely accurate is

entirely irrelevant, as they serve to enable her to commit violence that she would not otherwise ever commit. She does not fight or kill a person; she defends herself from a dangerous sub-human beast.

Grossman is able to attain much greater detail in his rhetorical approach than de Becker in enabling his readers to kill, and he describes at length how to best train soldiers and police officers to effectively kill in combat situations throughout both texts. Using the term “warrior” frequently, Grossman is particularly interested in inoculating his audience against hesitancy when killing. From a retired Colonel of the Vietnam War, Grossman offers this metaphor.

Most of the people in our society are sheep. They are kind, gentle, productive creatures who only hurt each other by accident. [. . .] Then there are the wolves, and the wolves feed on the sheep without mercy. Do you believe that there are wolves out there who will feed on the flock without mercy? You better believe it. There are evil men in this world and they are capable of evil deeds. The moment you forget that or pretend it not so, you become a sheep. There is no safety in denial. Then there are the sheepdogs. [They] live to protect the flock and confront the wolf. [. . .] The sheep generally do not like the sheepdog. He looks a lot like the wolf. He has fangs and the capacity for violence. [. . .] Still, the sheepdog disturbs the sheep. He is a constant reminder that there are wolves in the land. (qtd. in *On Combat* 181-182)

Inoculative nonfiction is in the business of perpetuating the “sheepdog” caste, and it employs all of its rhetorical strategies as means to this end. Police officers, for example, ostensible sheepdogs by profession, inoculate themselves through the text against indecision in combat situations by a similar means as de Becker’s lone mother.

Grossman, the established expert and authority on violence and killing, orders the police officer not to hesitate when killing. The text presents positively-connoted examples of police officers who did not hesitate and offers praise for their decisions; alternately, the text analyzes negative examples of various failures and then invites the reader to learn from them. The text derides enemies as a criminal scum bags, and tells the officer he must never let his fellow officers down. This process seeks to enable the reader to more effectively commit violence and reduces the natural hesitancy towards killing, should the course of events require it. The dramatic retelling of sensationalized events serves as a heuristic that is hopefully more memorable, and thus more effective, than a mere textbook or lecture containing similar material. As proof this works, Grossman again points to the historic levels of nonfiring rates, which plummeted dramatically once the military began appealing to all four levels of trauma training continuum I have outlined and implementing tactics for the group absolution of trauma directly into basic training.

If depictions of positively-connoted violence in a text can enable it audience to succeed in a combat situation and commit violence or kill, then it seems the opposite can also be true: “giving warriors the experience of losing in a simulation actually begins to condition a risk aversion pathway in the brain to which they may turn during similar experiences in the future—they may actually stop fighting and give up as they were

programmed to do in training” (*On Combat* 134). The antithesis of inoculative nonfiction, then, is a text, film, or heuristic in which the protagonist cannot survive the traumatic event and the narrative attempts to deny the audience a chance learn from the experience. Such depressing nihilistic endings, such as that in George A. Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), or the more recent film by Frank Darabont, *The Mist* (2007), may reinforce the possibility of future trauma and in fact create “pre-battle” casualties. Bleak or not, the fact that this structure is aesthetically appealing to many fans of horror is undeniable—as I will demonstrate at length in the following chapter with the case of H.P. Lovecraft.

What may prove fruitful, though, as an explanation for those texts that seem to break this pedagogical model is a brief comparison to the manifesto of *The Theatre of Cruelty* by the French dramatist Antonin Artaud. Appalled by the mundane aspects of civilized life and what he felt was its accompanying false reality, Artaud envisioned a creed of *The Theatre of Cruelty*, a spiritual and emotional project designed to “choose themes and subjects corresponding to the agitation and unrest of our times” (80). For Artaud, cruelty was not necessarily evil, or even something one should avoid; rather, it was a “very lucid, a kind of strict control and submission to necessity.” He claimed that “There is no cruelty without consciousness, without the application of consciousness, for the latter gives practising any act in life a blood red tinge, its cruel overtones, since it is understood that being alive means the death of someone else” (80). Adopting a similar methodology to contemporary psychodramatists, Artaud tried to remove the aesthetic distance of the stage by exposing the spectator to the turbulent emotions of

life through art that was shocking and disturbing by design. As Lee Jamieson explains, “By turning theatre into a place where the spectator is exposed rather than protected, Artaud was committing an act of cruelty upon them” (23). But Artaud’s cruelty was neither self-indulgent nor malicious; it was designed as a vehicle for cathartic experience. He writes, “This cruelty will be bloody if need be, but not systematically so, and will therefore merge with the idea of a kind of severe mental purity, not afraid to pay the cost one must pay in life” (81). If Artaud is right, then perhaps this notion of cruelty provides another lens to view the phenomenon of textual or artistic inoculation; beyond pragmatics, it is a phenomenological mechanism of humanistic discovery and a somewhat dark celebration of our lives, as observed most commonly through our own suffering and the horrors of other people’s lives. Inoculation, by virtue of its proclivities as a purveyor of discomfort, at the very least momentarily jostles its readers out of their “intellectual stupor.” Maybe inoculation provides more than just survival strategies, but presents some insight into life itself.

In the anguished, catastrophic times we live in, we feel an urgent need for theatre that is not overshadowed by events, but arouses deep echoes within us and predominates over our unsettled period. Our longstanding habit of seeking diversions has made us forget the slightest idea of serious theatre which upsets all our preconceptions, inspiring us with fiery, magnetic imagery and finally reacting on us after the manner of unforgettable soul therapy. (Artaud 64-5)

The Inoculative Age

While the precise efficacy of inoculative nonfiction is impossible to measure, the fact that mediation occurs, in some fashion, seems incontrovertible for several reasons. First, the very existence of inoculative nonfiction as a discrete and highly successful genre, at least in terms of popular opinion, demands that scholars acknowledge the fact that a very large body of Americans believe they can avoid trauma through textual preparation. While perceptions of trauma inoculation's effectiveness are not proof mediation occurs, the degree to which the methodology of vaccination is instilled into American culture demands theorists address it critically. Beyond nonfiction "how-to" books, many aspects of society embrace inoculation theory. For example, the popular television show *World's Scariest Police Videos* begins with the ominous promise, "Real cops, real crooks, real cases! What you see may shock you, but we bring it to you for one reason: because knowledge is power." Likewise, the show *Man vs. Wild* lets viewers watch a slightly crazed survival expert eat raw meat, drink his own urine, and barely survive hypothermia; the announcer begins each episode asking, "Does Bear Grylls really need to do these things? Probably not. But *you* might!" Also, paired with its sister text, *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War*, *The Zombie Survival Guide* by Max Brooks is a dead-pan serious study in inoculative speculative fiction, which promotes itself in almost the exact same manner as de Becker and Grossman:

The Zombie Survival Guide is your complete resource for surviving an encounter with the undead. You'll learn how to recognize your enemy and choose the right weapons to defend yourself. You'll get information

on the latest in killing techniques, along with tips on what to do when on the defense, on the run, or on the attack. (Brooks, par. 2)

Ironically, many authors of the necessarily sensationalized genre of inoculative nonfiction consistently deplore what they see as gratuitous violence in film, electronic games, and television; in fact, Grossman goes so far as to devote the final five chapters of his book *On Killing* to the perceived dangers of violent film and video games, and then later wrote an entire book on the topic, entitled *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill: A Call to Action Against TV, Movie and Video Game Violence* (1999). While singing the praises of *Super Mario Brothers* for its ability to help “develop trial-and-error and systematic problem-solving skills” (*On Combat* 314), Grossman agonizes over the more realistic shooter games, which he claims are far too similar to training tactics used by military and law enforcement personnel; violence in the media enables kids to commit violence and kill through repetitive conditioning in the same way as soldiers and police officers. While a soldier arguably wants to receive violence inoculation during their training, the chances of a young child successfully internalizing and coping with vicarious trauma in the media is much less likely: “[The kids] ‘drop out’ out of this ‘boot camp’ violentization process, but they are forever scarred by their experience” (*On Combat* 236).

True or not, Grossman is highly reactionary in his response to perceived violence in the media, yet the crux of this paradox lies in the fact that he, de Becker, and others are not only large scale producers of violent media themselves—in the form of always bloody inoculative nonfiction—but that they single-handedly launched a campaign that purveys enabling, graphic violence to entirely new audiences that are otherwise not

likely to play violent video games or consume violent media. In de Becker's case, this new audience seems to consist of predominantly middle and upper-class women. Though de Becker might argue that these women need enabling in order to survive in a violent society and are statistically unlikely to perpetrate wanton violence on others, one might also argue that today's children have an even greater need for survival strategies than do middle or upper-class women; it is the same dilemma summarized by the flippant bumper sticker, "Guns don't kill people, I kill people!" that inoculative nonfiction has yet to successfully navigate its way beyond.⁹

De Becker himself advocates "sheepdog" training for kids in the form of self-defense and kidnap prevention courses, but then does not seem to think training a child to gouge a kidnapper's eyes will increase the child's propensity for reckless violence. The difference, claims Grossman, is that the exposure kids receive from the media to violence and trauma is "without the safeguard of discipline" (*On Combat* 235). This seems reasonable, but Grossman cannot help but establish a direct correlation, which is suspicious at best and at its worst is utterly fallacious: "Most kids inflicted with media violence do not become killers, they just become depressed and fearful" (*On Combat* 238). Perhaps for the sheep caste this holds true, but it is not typically sheep that the aesthetics of horror and violent media typically appeal to; kids that do not enjoy the experience of watching a horror movie or playing a violent video game are less likely to voluntarily consume it. Unfortunately for his case, the parental warnings Grossman

⁹ An example of this problematic discourse is found in an interview of de Becker by Christopher Springmann in the July 2000 issue of *GUNS Magazine*.

readily endorses for video games are notably lacking on the cover of any of his texts; and without age restrictions, his books are considerably easier for a child to acquire than any current R- or X-rated film.

Grossman concludes his argument: “We are reaching that stage of desensitization at which the inflicting of pain and suffering has become a source of entertainment: vicarious pleasure rather than revulsion. We are learning to kill, and we are learning to like it” (*On Killing* 311). However, this statement loses much, if not all, of its impact and meaning when contextualized within a broader history of violence and culture; that fact that the wolf and sheepdog castes often enjoy their training and roles as purveyors of violence is certainly not a recent cultural development. The long tradition of both spectatorship and participation in such violent pastimes as sport-hunting, animal fighting, and gladiatorial-style combat by all societies and nations extends back millennia in some form or another. Indeed, the only trend that could possibly be new in terms of violence-related hobbies would be their absence from society. Though de Becker and Grossman are correct when they identify the modern era as one where technology facilitates the possibility for the rapid production and distribution of violent media to a greater degree than previous ages anticipated, the conclusions they reach and consequences they suggest as a result of this are highly problematic when viewed from a larger historical context

My purpose here is to highlight and outline the phenomenon of trauma inoculation, and since this study is analytical in nature and not a tract promoting inoculative nonfiction as social program, I will neither defend nor condemn its practical

implementation here. The paradox I just outlined is one that Americans will not soon resolve, and public perceptions of the ethics of trauma inoculation will thus remain highly controversial. When, how, and if people—and civilians and children, in particular—*should* receive inoculation lies within the realm of Isaiah Berlin's notion of positive liberty and will be left to the partisans and pundits. What is of great interest to this study, though, is how the discursive process of inoculation plays out textually between author, reader, and text. Now that this chapter has explored the basic mechanics of how inoculative nonfiction works to generate pre-memories for readers and enables them to better deal with trauma, the follow chapter will investigate similar operations of the category of pre-memory through the lens of horror fiction; in particular, I will seek to uncover how one horror author used his own texts to inoculate himself.

CHAPTER THREE: “ALL THE COSMOS IS A JEST”: PREEMPTIVE TRAUMA MEDIATION IN
THE FICTION OF H.P. LOVECRAFT

The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown. (Lovecraft *Supernatural Horror 1*)

Susannah Radstone writes that “well before the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, it was already commonplace to suggest that the twentieth century would be ‘remembered as the century of historical trauma’” (457). Today, many scholars study the implications surrounding the political power and socio-cultural impact of perceived suffering through postcolonial theory, gender, race, holocaust, and other cultural studies—to name a few. Technology’s newfound ability to convey images, events, and experiences nearly instantly—or at least to transmit compelling simulacra of such—provides unparalleled possibilities for spectatorship between competing accounts of trauma and violence around the world: these visual and aural media are conveniently packaged for personal consumption and piped directly into our homes. Though Slovenian cultural critic Slavoj Žižek notes the relative absurdity for one nation or society to privilege one set of traumatic events over another “which do not have the luck to be elevated by the media into the sublime victim of Absolute Evil,” the ubiquity of traumatic representation in modern society is undeniable (137). In *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (2005), E. Ann Kaplan claims,

scholars have rarely addressed the issue of vicarious trauma in people’s response to popular media. Studying vicarious trauma is especially

important in an era when global media project images of catastrophes all over the world as they are happening. Most of us generally encounter trauma vicariously through the media rather than directly. Since such exposure may result in symptoms of secondary trauma, we need to know as much as possible about the process. (87)

The highly interdisciplinary field of inoculative nonfiction provides an especially useful background to successfully enter into the discussion Kaplan suggests is still wanting by combining relevant research from the fields of military science, psychology, trauma studies, and other related areas.

In the first chapter I made the case that both horror and inoculative nonfiction share many of the same rhetorical strategies and effects, and in the second chapter I explored inoculative nonfiction at length and outlined two of its general practices on its own terms. Drawing from the frameworks I have previously discussed, this chapter will attempt to more closely examine the utility and various challenges of reading horror as inoculative. By doing so I hope to provide new insight into both genres and further corroborate my initial claim that the two are indeed highly similar. As a specific point of contact, this study will reread H.P. Lovecraft's notion of "cosmic horror" as an example of the inoculative potentiality of textual horror. Though any number of horror texts or authors or might adequately function as examples for this section, Lovecraft is an ideal candidate for several reasons. First, while I contend that nearly all horror can be read as inoculative to some degree, most authors do not intend it outright, and I have already demonstrated how a text that is aware of its inoculative potentiality functions in the case

of *Scream*. Second, a reading of Lovecraft's work as inoculative ostensibly presents a much more challenging task than *Scream*, as Lovecraft was explicitly and adamantly anti-didactic; in fact, few authors would bristle more than Lovecraft at the thought of having their fiction read as pragmatic and potentially beneficial to society. Third, Lovecraft wrote extensively about his ideolog(ies) and methodolog(ies) for "weird" fiction, and thus presents an tremendous depth of critical conversation to address and explore. Fourth and finally, a seemingly counterintuitive rereading of Lovecraft's work as inoculative is a substantial departure from previous scholarship surrounding him and will hopefully generate new insight into his fiction. This chapter will serve to further establish my initial claim that writers of horror fiction draw implicitly upon the logic of trauma theory in claiming that such literature has the power to inoculate, and in doing so prompts us to recognize the emergence of the new category of pre-memory.

The Cosmic Horror of H.P. Lovecraft

Horror literature and film frequently operate in a similar manner to that of inoculative nonfiction, though with one major difference. Many early gothicists, such as Walpole, Radcliffe, Lewis, and others, were culturally obligated to provide a tidy moral for their stories and engage in overt didacticism—thus ostensibly justifying their expeditions into the realm of the macabre and appeasing at least some of the genre's critics—and therefore conform to this model with relative ease. However, with the advent of modern and postmodern aesthetics, the nihilistic ideologies of much of (post)modern horror fiction and film seemingly troubles the inoculative nonfiction pattern in the sense that for most horror fans and critics overt didacticism has not only

lost its popularity, but is, in many cases, its own stringent taboo¹⁰. For example, though Wes Craven may claim to write his films as “boot camps,” it would be completely untenable to argue that all horror has a similar premeditated agenda. The weird fiction writers of the Modern Era—Arthur Machen, M.R. James, H.P. Lovecraft, Ambrose Bierce, and Lord Dunsany, to name a few—deliberately eschewed the morality of the high gothic romances. None were more outspoken about this than Lovecraft, whose well documented ideology of mechanistic materialism railed against even the suggestion of a moral in fiction. For Lovecraft, teaching, conditioning, or inoculation of any kind would never have been consideration.

Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890-1937) was an American author of gothic fiction who primarily wrote short stories for pulp magazines such as *Weird Tales*. Possessing near superhuman prolificacy, Lovecraft was “undoubtedly the most phenomenal letter-writer in history” (Gullette 2). Writing an estimated 100,000 letters in his lifetime comprising several million words, “his output, by one comparison, “exceeded that of other noted epistolarians Voltaire, Horace Walpole, and Samuel Johnson combined” (1). Lovecraft’s gothic fiction frequently operates within the framework of a loosely organized pantheon of mysterious entities many now refer to as the “Cthulhu Mythos.” Protagonists in a Lovecraft tale seldom fare well and rarely escape death or madness at the hands of a cruel or utterly indifferent universe that they can never fully understand. Stories in the Cthulhu Mythos frequently explore occultism, malevolent cosmic entities,

¹⁰ As proof of this, see the voluminous angry reviews from both fans and critics of the “preachy” ending of M. Night Shyamalan’s latest film, *The Happening* (2008).

and violent psychological breaches in perceptions of space and time; always central to Lovecraft's fiction are persistent themes of pessimism and a cynical rejection of humanocentric ideals. Though he received little recognition in his lifetime, within the last forty years or so scholarship surrounding him has flourished and elevated him to a status where many now compare him in significance to Poe, and some popular critics even go as far as to claim him as the "undisputed greatest practitioner of the classic horror tale" (King Cover).

Like many gothic authors, Lovecraft typically wrote about things that frightened him, and what scared Lovecraft was the fear of the dark sublime. As Bradley Will writes, "Lovecraft scares his readers not with the unknown but with the unknowable. His stories force us to look at and wonder about the outside, but more importantly, he demands that we recognize our own limitations and our relatively insignificant place in the cosmos" (Will 13). As a staunch and open atheist in a time of radical scientific discovery, failures of empirical reasoning created a vehicle for uninhibited soul-shaking terror. Fueled by world events and the various discoveries of his day, Lovecraft saw terror in the insignificance of the human race and found the staggering implications of modern physics and astronomy particularly unsettling, which he felt left little room for the fragile egos of mankind or any place for a benevolent god.

I have no opinions—I believe in nothing [. . .] My cynicism and skepticism are increasing, and from an entirely new cause—the Einstein Theory [. . .] All is chance, accident and ephemeral illusion. [. . .] There are no values in all infinity—the least idea that there are, is the supreme mockery of all.

All the cosmos is a jest, and one thing is as true as another. I believe everything and nothing—for all is chaos, always has been, and always will be. (*Selected Letters* / 231)

Where a scientist might revel in the various unknown mysteries of the universe, Lovecraft's fictive encounters present the cosmos as dolefully unknowable and terrifying to his characters. The monsters and extradimensional beings in his fiction are not necessarily terrifying because of any corporeal menace, but because his characters cannot reduce or understand them through conventional means, signaling what Lovecraft sees as a gross lack in human knowledge and awareness. In his essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, Lovecraft defines the basic textual mechanics of cosmic horror:

A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space. (3)

For the purposes of this study, cosmic horror has two primary meanings: it is first a type of phobia potentially experienced by his audience, but it also indicates the name and categorization of Lovecraft's literary genre. Shattering the perceived "fixed laws of Nature" in front of the bewildered eyes of a Lovecraftian protagonist is essentially a

linguistic move and illustrates what Will calls in “H.P. Lovecraft and the Semiotic Kantian Sublime” a “semiotic crisis” (5). Denying his characters an adequate system of signification suggests something “so far beyond the edges of our language, so far removed from our frame of reference, that it defeats the system. [. . .] Its only designation can be its lack of designation. It is, if you will, a blank spot. This ‘blank spot’—a signified with no signifier or a signifier with no signified—is a failure of the system of language” (6). Lovecraft uses the motif of the blank spot to some extent in all of his fiction, and it occurs in many forms.

Lovecraft’s most famous story, “The Call of Cthulhu,” also builds upon the concept of cosmic horror as spawned from a series of semiotic crises. The story reveals the deplorable plight of several men who become involved in a hunt across the globe for clues to a titanic underwater beast named Cthulhu that is waiting for the stars to properly align so it can rise up and wreak havoc among humanity. One of the clues comes in the form of a demonic cult chanting in a remote swamp village. The narrator is baffled not just by the cultists’ presence, but by the inexplicable nature of their chants, which are not based on any earthly linguistic system:

The cultists' incantation, “Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'l'yeh wgah'nagl fhtagn,” is itself an element of the Kantian sublime. [. . .] Lovecraft makes a point of showing that these names are not derived from a mundane linguistic system [. . .] Lovecraft presents a sensation which is not sound but is analogous to sound. He presents a language which, likewise, is a

language only by analogy. They are [. . .] part of the depiction of the sublime. They are themselves indeterminate signifiers. (Will 12)

The cosmic terror climaxes at the end of the story as a Norwegian ship arrives at the mysterious island that has risen from the bottom of the sea. As the sailors explore the island's bizarre "non-Euclidean" architecture, they inadvertently release Cthulhu, who crawls out of a cave and begins an terrible rampage: "The Thing cannot be described—there is no language for such abysses of shrieking and immemorial lunacy, such eldritch contradictions of all matter, force, and cosmic order" (21). The conclusion of the story reveals that the members of the ship's crew that are not killed go insane due to their encounter with Cthulhu—not because of a fear of death, but as a response to the shock of Cthulhu as a manifestation of the unrepresentable and as a gruesome failure of their preconceptions about the universe. This linguistic assault on the minds of his characters and the readers corresponds with Lovecraft's staunch mechanistic materialism that afforded him little personal comfort or hope:

Now, all my tales are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interest and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos at large. To me there is nothing but puerility in a tale in which the human form—and the local human passions and conditions and standards—are depicted as notice to other worlds or other universes. To achieve the essence of real externality, whether of time or space or dimension, one must forget that such things as organic life, good and evil,

love and hate, and all such local attributes of negligible and temporary race called mankind have existence at all. (*Selected Letters II* 150)

To label Lovecraft as merely an atheist or materialist is, perhaps, to do his rather complicated ideology a great deal of injustice. Cosmic horror, which Lovecraft uses synonymously with “real externality” in the previous passage, was not just a knee-jerk reaction or angry criticism of the idealistic humanists but was a textual vehicle searching for truth, beauty, and meaning in a cold and unfeeling universe. Though certainly cynical, cosmic horror is potentially empowering as it presents a chance to free oneself from what Lovecraft called the “galling limitations” of natural laws, “which forever imprison and frustrate our curiosity about the infinite cosmic spaces beyond the radius of our sight and analysis” (*Misc. Writings* 113). As a vehicle, cosmic horror also provides the necessary connection to inoculative nonfiction though the process of textual “exorcism.”

Textual Exorcism

Many, if not most, contemporary horror authors and directors seemingly adopt some form of a cosmic horror aesthetic—at least in the sense that textual moralism remains largely out of style. While exceptions exist, usually in form of karmic tales of revenge, this does not preclude attempts at reading horror as unintentionally inoculative. While I concede it is highly unlikely that even the openly didactic texts of Walpole, Radcliffe, Lewis, and other early horror authors had the methodology of inoculative fiction in mind, the logic of trauma inoculation suggests that, intentional or not, all horror texts serve to preemptively mediate future trauma for their readers in a

similar fashion to that of inoculative nonfiction. Just as de Becker can tell a story of a graphic rape and scar his readers to modify future behavior, so does anyone who reads a gothic text or watches a horror film scar themselves in a nearly identical fashion. Even without deliberate analysis and exposition, exposure to simulated trauma in text can mediate future experience; or, as Caruth explains, it “may result in symptoms of secondary trauma.”

Though, as previously discussed, vicariously experienced trauma can be harmful or palliative, many scholars believe that the creation and consumption of horror media is potentially therapeutic. In his survey of twentieth-century horror film Tony Magistrale writes, “at its best horror [. . .] is perhaps most like a visit to a trusted psychoanalyst: we reveal something of what is troubling us, and in return we get the opportunity to explore its meaning to our lives—and maybe, if we are lucky, to leave less anxious than when we arrived” (18). This concept becomes clearer by returning momentarily to the mind of Lovecraft. Though vehemently anti-didactic in principle, Robert Bloch theorizes that, in fact, Lovecraft may have explicitly sought to cope with the trauma of his life through the writing of cosmic horror:

Consider the phenomenon of exorcism, this time from the view-point of the artist rather than the audience. Most writers who chose to work within the horror genre do so to exorcise their own fears by exposing and expressing them to an audience. [. . .] Drawing upon a common heritage of myth, legend, and fairy tales, they employ a technique of conveying their visions in terms of convincing reality. [. . .] Lovecraft intended to

present an explanation of why horror fiction appealed to certain types of readers. And in so doing he unconsciously revealed his own reasons for writing—as attempts to come to grips with a lifelong fear of the unknown.

(xxiv-xxvi)

Bloch's thought directly corresponds with Magistrale's notion that horror seeks to ease anxiety and better prepare the reader—or in this case, the author—for future trauma; for Lovecraft, this process is somewhat covert. Coming to grips with a past fear is not the same as preparing for future anxiety, but once again, this is largely a matter of timing. Just as a psychodramatist can prepare for a future traumatic event through role-playing and developing a pre-memory, the logic of trauma inoculation suggests that a writer may pre-exorcise personal demons before they can take up residence in one's soul. The fallacy of too easily determining authorial intention aside, there is no shortage of scholarship suggesting that Lovecraft wrote to ameliorate his own trauma; the best of which I will outline now outline.

One does not have to delve very far into Lovecraft's biography to find repeated instances of fear, loneliness, isolation, and longing for connection. (Surely a look into most people's biographies would reveal much of the same.) Lovecraft's seemingly favorite motif, the monster, would thus be, according to Bloch, the literary incarnation of Lovecraft's own fear and anxieties. Whereas in "reality" the problems of life—like Lovecraft's feelings of isolation, racism, atheism, marital anxiety, and so on—are problems that are difficult to describe, defeat, or even acknowledge, through his fiction he could create monsters that served as tangible outlets for non-corporeal problems.

This sounds suspiciously like repression, which, in this case, is half correct. Fueled by Lovecraft's "industrial-strength eugenics" (Jones 129)—which, to be fair, extend well beyond mere xenophobia to a general sense of misanthropy—his supposed asexuality, and an active disdain for religion, a conventional Freudian reading would suggest that Lovecraft's work is little more than yet another example of the standard "return of the repressed" motif. Advocated by Robin Wood, the structure of the return of the repressed, or the return to repression, claims that "horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilizations represses or oppresses, its re-emergence dramatized [. . .] as an object of horror [. . .] *and the happy ending (when it exists) typically signifying the restoration of repression*" (qtd. in Hill 49).

In one sense, this succinctly explains the existence of inoculative nonfiction as a genre. Violence, like sexuality, is actively repressed by most modern cultures. Though the slaughtering of animals for food used to be an integral part of most people's lives, now, with omnipresent supermarkets and pre-packaging, most Americans can go their entire lives eating all the meat they want without ever having to see a drop of animals' blood. This once common ritual of violence is now a spectacle reduced to underground video "nasties," such as in the case of Shockumentary.com, which currently purveys the slaughter of animals under the heading of "the most kick ass rotten videos ever made [. . .] These are unmistakably underground videos [that have] long been a staple of frat houses and cult hazing ceremonies and is required viewing for any serious fan or collector." Grossman points out that he is, for all his years in the military, a "virgin" of killing himself; thus we may surmise that his texts are themselves a type of self-

inoculation against his own repression—he wants to explore that which is culturally forbidden to him. He claims, “To neglect [violence] is to indulge it. This is, therefore, a study of aggression, a study of violence, and a study of killing” (*On Killing* xxix). For Grossman and de Becker, the “happy ending” Woods refers to in the return of the repressed motif is the social justification and liberation inoculative nonfiction provides for committing violence. Inoculative nonfiction liberates its readers by enabling them to confront and perpetrate violence, though simultaneously commanding them to use their power with the strictest discipline—repressing them all over again. Thus the sheepdog caste can continue living in relative peace among the sheep with the hope that it can deactivate its own repression on command and bare its teeth at will.

Woods’ reading, and any reading of Lovecraft’s fiction as merely an exercise in confronting repression, though, fails to take into account the fact that as a phobic pressure point Lovecraft’s cosmic horror was not a repressive cultural trend he wanted to confront, defeat, and rebury. For Lovecraft, though certainly repulsive and terrifying, cosmic horror is more akin to a Pandora’s Box that one must open and learn to deal with in perpetuity. Whether or not Cthulhu is in the shape of “a terrifying vagina” (Jones 129-30) and is a reflection of Lovecraft’s own sexual insecurities is but a footnote to the looming shadow of ever-present cynicism. Thus, I would argue, that the various secondary motifs in Lovecraft’s fiction—xenophobia, misogyny, and so forth—are likely the capricious irruptions of Lovecraft’s personal repression, but that they are somewhat arbitrary and completely subservient to the persistent ideology of mechanistic

materialism. What makes a Lovecraftian monster unique and different from a “return of the repressed”-style slasher villain is the pessimism of cosmic horror.

For Lovecraft, there is no salvation for humanity, no hope of the triumph of science, and it is only a matter of time before we are all extinct and forgotten. The fact that Lovecraft typically frames his stories using the archetypal structure of a failed hero quest for truth can, by extension, be read to suggest that the result of Lovecraft’s own personal quest for truth and meaning led him to just that—disappointment and “monsters.” In his essay “The Outsider,” Dirk Mosig points out that Lovecraft’s cynical view of the world extended itself to believe that most people are unhappy and that this life of constant suffering is generally *not* favorable to death. Seriously considering suicide at one point, he finally decided against it on the grounds that the aesthetic pleasure he found in the study of “eighteenth-century art slightly tipped the scales in favor of life. He considered the quest for truth, for new knowledge, the sole possible justification for the existence of the human species, and his eternal question was ‘what is reality?’” (35).

This quest for “reality” took many forms. It is well documented that many of Lovecraft’s stories correspond directly to current events and anxieties of his day. Lovecraft, like Poe, was fascinated by catastrophes and scientific discoveries, both of which served to reinforce his materialistic outlook on life. For example, Lovecraft wrote both “At the Mountains of Madness” and “The Whisperer in Darkness,” at or around the time C.W. Tombaugh discovered Pluto in 1930; reports of oceanic earthquakes immediately preceded both “Dagon” and “The Call of Cthulhu”; and “The Horror at Red

Hook" followed Lovecraft's much detested stay in a "degenerate" Brooklyn suburb (Lieber 6). It should then come as no surprise to those who are familiar with Lovecraft's ideology that the version of reality his protagonists find on their "quests" correspond directly to the "god(s)" Lovecraft found in his own search for truth and meaning: the gods of cynical materialism. Fritz Lieber explores this concept in his essay "A Literary Copernicus" as he describes Lovecraft's chief "god" throughout the Cthulhu Mythos, Azathoth, who is the

supreme deity, occupying the top-most throne in the Cthulhu hierarchy.

There is never any question of his being merely an alien entity from some distant planet or dimension. [. . .] He is unquestionably "god," and also the greatest god. Yet when we ask what sort of god, we discover that he is the blind, idiot god [. . .] "the mindless daemon-sultan" [. . .] "the monstrous nuclear chaos." Such a pantheon and such a chief deity can symbolize only one thing: the purposeless, mindless, yet all-powerful universe of materialistic belief. (9)

It is, Lieber continues, this association of fiction and creator that shows how Lovecraftian protagonists are "drawn to the unknown as much as they dread it. Quaking at the horrors that may lurk there, yet they cannot resist the urge to peer beyond the rim of space" (10).

Lovecraft frequently depicts his characters' journey to confront the unknown in terms of a figurative descent through invented mythology, which is usually facilitated by a literal descent into a basement, dungeon, or deep into the abyss of space. Maurice

Lévy argues that this descent into myth has a “therapeutic significance” for Lovecraft (111).

These images [of descent] hold a signification. The endless steps, the inclined planes, the spirals that bore into space lead no doubt to the elements of a setting, as but as surely perhaps to the obscurest region of abysmal life. The vertical axis that they define forms an inner place, a space inside which the author, more than his characters, explores his dreams with muffled and agonized steps. Are the monsters that populate his oeuvre perhaps those he discovers, or imagines, he discovers, in the very depths of himself? We think of the slabs, the heavy rocks that the actors of certain dramas cautiously place over the orifices of the lower world: a wise measure taken by those who know to maintain their demons in a thankful lethargy. . . . [sic] But it is a tenacious evil, inscribed in the obscurest folds of the past, and it laughs at such obstacles, breaks all the barriers, and is perpetuated from age to age. (71)

The monsters he finds in the “depths of himself” are, as myth, part of a universal phobia of the mysterious cosmos. Though Lovecraft is unique in the ways that he chooses to represent and embody his anxiety, he acknowledges a common history of terror as he writes that a general foundation of ever-present cosmic fear “has existed, and always will exist.” As evidence of this collective angst, Lovecraft describes the inscrutable impulse that drives writers such as himself to “try their hands at it in isolated tales, as if to discharge from their minds certain phantasmal shapes which would otherwise haunt

them”(Supernatural Horror 14). Lévy further speculates that Lovecraft was not merely seeking to liberate himself from personal demons, but the process of writing horror, as Artaud also suggests, is one of discovery and assigns signification to the “themes and subjects corresponding to the agitation and unrest of our times” (80).

Lovecraft was, as we have seen, a man without hope. Unstable, sick, unhappy, obstinately rejecting what he considered the delusions of faith, fed on nihilistic philosophies, he had frequently thought of suicide. Only his dreams—his correspondence testifies to it—permitted him to overcome each crisis and to try once again to live. Did he not in dream find, in the blackest moments, the unexpected help of secret and vitalizing forces? We are then tempted to regard the Cthulhu Mythos, whose elaboration was slow, progressive, and continuous, as the adequate receptacle for the author’s anguish, where, in the waters of dream, it could “precipitate,” form deposits in precise, horrible, *monstrous* shapes at the bottom of a structure ready to receive them and give them meaning. Driven by myth [. . .] horror can only be expressed by and in sacrilege: the impious cults, hideous ceremonies, blasphemous rites elsewhere mentioned, which tell a reverse history of salvation. It is at this deep level that the cure operates: because the sick man recognizes these images of horror as his own, he is in a position to assume them fully and thereby overcome them. To give a material representation to anguish is in itself to be freed from it. [. . .] For we can never totally

invent our monsters; they express our inner selves too much for that.

(115)

By giving meaning to the “horrible, monstrous” shapes of the dark sublime, Lovecraftian cosmic horror, then, may be seen as an attempt at re-signifying, or pre-signifying, the “blank spots” of the numinous and inexplicable. Even if the attempt fails, as it always does in Lovecraft story, the process remains therapeutic.

If Bloch and Lévy are right, and Lovecraft seeks to textually exorcise his demons through his writing, then as the author and the intended target of the textual inoculation, Lovecraft fills the roles of both inoculator and inoculatee. In a sense, Lovecraft becomes the reader of his own text in order to tap into its inoculative process and experience its therapeutic, cathartic power. By writing/reading his dramatic encounter with trauma, Lovecraft can vicariously experience the trauma of his characters via the structure of pre-memory. Keeping Kaplan’s logic in mind, we may also infer that this purgation process can be completed not only by the one performing the ritual—or, in other words, Lovecraft’s audience can also vicariously exorcise their demons through the text. Just as Lovecraft creates and essentially role-plays his own personal trauma through the medium of his fiction, so can we conclude that the reader may vicariously experience some of his trauma through consumption of the text. Since the methodology of Lovecraft’s personal inoculation is so well documented, the remainder of this chapter will rhetorically analyze the typical strategies of his work assuming that Lovecraft himself is the intended reader—with the understanding that other readers may vicariously share in his experience.

In order to successfully read Lovecraft as inoculative, one must first carefully identify the specific type of inoculation for which his fiction is designed. Unlike de Becker or Grossman, Lovecraft is not at all interested in saving people from attack and does not care if his characters can physically defend themselves. Most of Lovecraft's encounters or altercations with malevolent entities prove fatal, and if they did not, it was largely a matter of luck or hideous destiny leading only to madness or mutation. Lovecraftian cosmic horror indeed operates according to the model of inoculative nonfiction, but it is never physical survival that is the end goal. Not surprisingly, Lovecraftian cosmic horror inoculates against the past, current, or future threat of cosmic horror.

Trauma Inoculation in Lovecraftian Cosmic Horror

It is important to reaffirm at this point that any reading of Lovecraft as inoculative is not mutually exclusive to its aesthetic appeal or related in any way to its status in any canon. The logic of trauma inoculation suggests that under the right circumstances, any instance of traumatic representation can and may serve to inoculate its audience; this does not necessarily make the representation any more or less legitimate in the eyes of fans or critics. Neither does this analysis seek to "redeem" Lovecraft by offering a pragmatic reading of his ideology; Lovecraft needs no redemption, and reading his work as inoculative is not intended as an act of recuperation. What I will show is that this logic suggests that traumatic representation, even in a form such as the fiction of Lovecraft, may result in symptoms of real trauma that the reader—in this case, Lovecraft himself—can apply for inoculative purposes.

Firefighters inoculate themselves against fire, and sailors inoculate themselves against sinking ships; Lovecraft draws upon the logic of trauma theory and the concept of pre-memory through his use of the exacerbation of textual trauma through hyperdramatic narrative to inoculate against the unknown, or, more accurately, the unknowable. The text inflicts trauma through Lovecraft's signature blend of cosmic horror that creates in the reader an "atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces." Just as in inoculative nonfiction, the text strives for plausibility. Though Lovecraft's "daemons of unplumbed space" may seem the epitome of implausibility, Lovecraft considered his style of writing to be much more believable than "the literature of mere physical fear and the mundanely gruesome" (*Supernatural Horror* 15). By relying on atmosphere and psychological terror, Lovecraft felt he tapped into something much more real than anything an ostensible "realist" author could achieve, and the artifices of fantasy he employed did not distract from his purpose.

Also, in a similar fashion to inoculative nonfiction, is Lovecraft's preference for the first-person voice for the purpose of adding to the perceived plausibility of the account. Many of Lovecraft's stories go so far as to provide a frame attempting to create a fictitious history of the text itself. The most common frame is that of a diary. Instead of an omniscient third-person narrator relating a story with no apparent purpose than to amuse the reader, Lovecraftian fiction typically presents itself documentary style. This textual-*vérité* encourages the possibility for the audience to share in some of the trauma experienced by the storyteller. Most of Lovecraft's fiction adopts a structure of horrific discovery very similar to Grossman's account of the U.N.

Peacekeeper in the Congo: an unwitting protagonist stumbles upon a scene of indescribable horror, and the narrator then describes the events in terrible, meticulous detail. These details then serve to help the reader achieve a “veteran” status before facing his own cosmic horror. The reader does not become a veteran of monsters, though, but a pre-battle veteran against the “assaults of chaos”—the reader becomes better prepared to deal with a cold, indifferent universe (*Supernatural Horror* 15). Though Grossman calls the section in his book dealing with the U.N. peacekeeper a study of “atrocities”—connoting something unnatural or “evil”—this word has less meaning in the realm of Lovecraft’s cynical materialism where such religious-minded distinctions are mostly useless. Notwithstanding, in a moment of linguistic desperation it is not uncommon for a Lovecraftian narrator to refer to something as “blasphemous” or as an “abomination.” Since cosmic horror has no adequate signifiers, the reader witnesses the futility of human rationality and language, and it is this semiotic failure that creates the true terror and inoculation.

By reading a Lovecraft story the reader preemptively encounters a hypothetical situation where “human laws and interest and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos at large” and, just as in Grossman’s text, the reader has the potential to feel real trauma. In Grossman’s words, “Ultimately the purpose of this [technique], and of this study, has been to look at the ugliest aspect of [cosmic horror], that we might know, name it, and confront it” (*On Killing* 227). By re-signifying, or pre-signifying, the numinous, or at least familiarizing the reader with its insignifiability, the text prepares the reader for a similar encounter in the future. Just as Einstein and Darwin’s

theories made Lovecraft feel that “there are no values in all infinity,” so does his horror text create a pre-memory for and seek to pre-exorcise the ideological demon that “All the cosmos is a jest, and one thing is as true as another” in advance for the reader. This occurs not by banishing or denying it, but by embracing its reality and inescapability.

In terms of inoculation, Lovecraftian horror skirts the line between theoretical efficacy—the more traumatic the better—and artistic pretention. As an author formally devoted to the amateur writer movement, Lovecraft cared little for mainstream audience approachability and sought only to perfect his art. Lovecraft could not “discharge” from his mind the “phantasmal shapes which would otherwise haunt” him through a text that was “mundanely gruesome,” and instead found success in the more subtle atmospheric style he is now known for; he precisely tailored his personal vaccine to *his* individual needs. Just as in its nonfiction counterpart, most of Lovecraft’s tales inoculate by appealing to multiple levels of the continuum of trauma training efficiency. The famous opening passage of “The Call of Cthulhu” presents a perfect example of this in action; the story begins with an abstract theoretical principle, and the paragraph offers a sort of warning—a declaration of that which the reader must inoculate against.

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of

our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into peace and safety of a new dark age. (130)

Table 3

Continuum of Trauma Training Efficiency and Lovecraft

Stage	Application in <i>The Call of Cthulhu</i>
1. Abstraction	“We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far”
2. The Practical Example	Brief mention of Professor Angell’s death
3. Dramatic Narrative in Fiction in Film	The sensationalized account of the encounter with Cthulhu <i>et al.</i>
4. High-Stress Live Drill	(Hypothetical) Cthulhu: The Haunted House Experience

For practical “textbook” examples Lovecraft casually describes several fictional scenarios told in a third-person voice where people go insane following their encounter with Cthulhu and its cult(ure). For example, the narrator briefly describes how Professor Angell of Brown University dies suspiciously of what most think to be a heart-attack after witnessing something cosmically horrific. The majority of the text describes in thoroughly hyperdramatic fashion two major encounters with cosmic horror—including an ill-fated face-to-face encounter with Cthulhu itself; Lovecraft seeks to exacerbate the textual trauma of the reader and fills these moments with melodrama, disgusting details,

and exclamation points. The story concludes with the first-person voice of the main narrator who is now psychologically destroyed from all he has found: “I have looked upon all that the universe has to hold of horror, and even the skies of spring and the flowers of summer must ever afterward be poison to me” (158).

Lovecraft does not, of course, suggest the fourth stage—a high-stress live drill. There are few—if any—suitable examples of training drills for the prevention of cosmic horror in contemporary society, and if they do exist they would likely be even scarcer in Lovecraft’s time; a trip to a spook-alley, magic-lantern show, or “haunted house,” perhaps, being the only events even remotely similar for “live” participation available—if these activities do indeed inoculate against such horrors as Lovecraft concerns his fiction with. Just like a psychodrama session, the degree that a spectator “can enter into the life upon the stage [. . .] is the measure of the catharsis he is able to obtain on this occasion.” The more psychologically affective Lovecraft makes his fiction, the more readers can “integrate” the text into their mind and inoculation occurs to a greater degree.

Since the end goal of a Lovecraftian inoculation is to better prepare its author and readers for the realization that “All the cosmos is a jest, and one thing is as true as another,” and beyond that, to ensure the ability to successfully negotiate the event with minimal subsequent psychological debilitation, Lovecraft’s fiction must actively enable the reader to cope with this particular brand of trauma. Whereas inoculative nonfiction enables its readers to kill or commit violence, Lovecraft must enable the reader to “kill” or violently reject restrictive ideologies and all forms of humanocentrism. Eschewing

“ignorance” and idealism for the capacity of cynical materialism, the text seeks safety through the enabling of one’s personal potential for hopelessness: “there is nothing but puerility in a tale in which the human form—and the local human passions and conditions and standards—are depicted as notice to other worlds or other universes.” For Lovecraft, the process of enabling is not just a secondary, back-up mechanic—it is absolutely essential to the inoculation process.

A successful Lovecraft inoculation can only occur by preemptively rejecting humanistic notions of philosophy and ethics can one hope to psychologically survive an encounter with cosmicism. At the age of thirty-two he wrote “A Confession of Unfaith,” which ostensibly illustrates a post-inoculation process Lovecraft who is now thoroughly hardened and ready to face anything.

I no longer really desire anything but oblivion, and am thus ready to discard any gilded illusion or accept any unpalatable fact with perfect equanimity. I can at last concede willingly that the wishes, hopes, and values of humanity are matters of total indifference to the blind cosmic mechanism. Happiness I recongise [sic] as an ethical phantom who simulacrum comes fully to none and even partially to but few, and whose position as the goal of all human striving is a grotesque mixture of farce and tragedy. (537)

This mentality significantly problematizes my discussion of pre-battle casualties in the previous chapter; however, though Lovecraft writes consistently “unhappy” endings to his stories, the hopelessness of the various scenarios are not so much an indication of

the protagonists' future success against attack, but it is the nature of the traumatic ideology they must contend with. Lovecraft's fiction suggests to his reader the idea that "It's hopeless!" is not what you should live in fear of, should you face an encounter with cosmic horror, but the realization that "it's hopeless!" and you do not stand a chance against a cold, unfeeling cosmos is the precise ideology you need to thoroughly internalize to escape mental debilitation. Just because one adopts a stance of mechanistic materialism does not mean one cannot live a moderately happy and ultimately fulfilling life. Thus, for Lovecraft, in order to become a pre-battle veteran of cosmic horror, one must willingly despair and become what Grossman would consider a pre-battle casualty. Even though Lovecraft's characters always fail to survive their encounters with cosmic horror, Lovecraft is a practical example of vicarious self-inoculation from their demise; by inoculating himself he managed to successfully function in his system of beliefs and, through his writing and appreciation of art, found sufficient reason to live and learn. Lovecraft even felt enough confidence to revel and seemingly enjoy his position of unbelief. At the close of his celebratory manifesto on weird fiction and the allure of the genre of cosmic horror Lovecraft scolds anyone who would doubt his aesthetics: "Yet who shall declare the dark theme a positive handicap? Radiant with beauty, the Cup of the Ptolemies was carven in onyx" (Supernatural Horror 106).

For the Lovecraftian text to successfully inoculate its readers, it must enable them to jettison idealistic preconceptions of the universe, and the logic of trauma inoculation suggests that this occurs in largely the same manner as inoculative

nonfiction seeks to enable its reader to commit violence: the text tries to achieve this rhetorically through accustomizing the reader to the rejection of humanocentric ideologies and familiarizing them with positively-connoted examples of perceived justifiable cynicism (see Table 4). Similarly, we can read that Lovecraftian fiction presents a “boot camp for the psyche” where the audience reads again and again how characters come to terms with, or fail to, instances of cosmic horror. Though survival is never guaranteed, readers learn they must reject idealism and hope if they are to have a chance of maintaining their sanity; the hyperdramatic narrative serves to reinforce the inoculation, and any “real” trauma felt by the reader during or after consumption of the text increases its efficacy.

Table 4

A Pedagogical Model of Lovecraftian Fiction

Rhetorical Strategy	Effect on Reader
Dramatic narration	Seizes the reader’s attention
Narration contains deliberately traumatizing material	Heightens the reader’s faculty of slightly scars the psyche
Exposition and analysis	Explores and explains cosmic horror to prevent its future impact
The trauma vaccination conditions the reader and preemptively mediates future experience	When the reader encounter “real” cosmic horror, the conditioning mediates the experience in some way

Once again, Lovecraft himself provides a practical example of this strategy in action.

Though he faced personal horror at the revelation of Einstein and Darwin's theories, by repeatedly snuffing out the lives and sanity of the straw-men in his fiction he managed to embrace the unknowability of the universe enough to continue to function in life.

In his manifesto on weird fiction, Lovecraft adopts the artistic high-ground of a pedantic curmudgeon and strict anti-didact: "We may say, as a general thing, that a weird story whose intent is to teach or produce a social effect [. . .] is not a genuine tale of cosmic fear" (*Supernatural Horror* 16). However, the fact that we *can* read a "genuine" tale of supernatural horror to teach or produce a social effect need not in any way detract from its status in the eye of its author, fans or critics. Recognizing how Lovecraft draws upon the logic of trauma theory by inoculating his readers/himself via the mechanism of pre-memory prompts us to rethink the social functions and impetus for the popular demand of horror. Pre-memory allows us to better understand what scholars, fans, and alarmists have tried desperately to explain for decades—why do people seek out art-horror and how does it affect them?

CODA: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF IDENTIFYING PRE-MEMORY IN POPULAR MEDIA

So, here's the map for the journey: We'll start by putting our present situation into the context of things we've experienced in the past. Then I'll discuss how fear works—at its best and at its worst. With that foundation, we'll look at what you can do about [trauma] and then study some of the specific hazards we're facing today. I'll share ideas about how to get information without being scared half to death in the process, and finally we'll look at some truths about human beings who act violently. If you stay with me—through both the hard truths and the reassuring ones—I feel certain you'll be better prepared for the times ahead of us. [. . .] Then you can see if you reach the same conclusions I have: that you can find your life in these times, that can influence your own safety, that you can protect your country, that you can manage fear, and that you are going to be alright. (de Becker *Fear Less* 21)

As de Becker points out, “In the satellite age, you see, we don't experience just the calamities in our own lives—we experience the calamities in everyone's life. So Americans have a far larger index of fears to draw upon” (*Fear Less* 48). The realization of the massive volume of trauma distributed by the media demands that critics acknowledge the need society feels to comprehend psychological suffering. Either as victim or perpetrator, the utility of understanding violence and pain is at a premium, and by exploring trauma theory and its sister disciplines (military science, psychodrama, killology, and others), scholars can gather resources from a wide range of fields previous

generations did not have access to. As a literary structure, pre-memory explains not only how inoculative nonfiction and gothic texts claim to mediate their audiences future behavior and experiences, but we can also apply the category of pre-memory as a lens to explore texts far outside the realm of what we typically considered horror or horrific texts.

Referring to the cultural “wound” delivered to New Yorkers by the September 11th attacks, Kaplan concludes her text, *Trauma Culture*, with the lines, “the residues of the trauma that perhaps lay beneath the conflicts and tensions of rebuilding may be lessening. We have begun to translate the trauma into a language of acceptance while deliberately keeping the wound open; we are learning to mourn what happened, bear witness to it, and yet move forward” (147). It would seem that many texts operate under a similar banner to the one Kaplan raises for dealing with trauma. Since inoculative nonfiction frequently justifies its existence through a connection with children—we need to prepare ourselves so we can protect our kids; we need to make sure we do not enable our kids to kill, and so forth—it seems useful to briefly examine a pre-memory structure beyond the typical discussion of horror or gory shooter games. Americans, for example, often teach their young children literacy from the fiction of the much beloved Theodor Geisel, also known as Dr. Seuss. A fiery political cartoonist and activist, many of his children’s texts directly implement the mechanism of pre-memory. In one particularly violent book, *I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew* (1965), Seuss hyperdramatically exposes his audience to the tale of a naïve, yet likeable gold-furred animal on a visit to the titular city of Solla Sollew. While en route, various malevolent

creatures repeatedly threaten, harass, and physically assault the timid creature. Failing to reach his destination due to continuous “trouble,” the protagonist abandons his journey and his current pacifistic ideology in favor of a plan that is much more cynical and enabling:

Then I started back home
 To the Valley of Vung.
 I know I'll have troubles.
 I'll, maybe, get stung.
 I'll always have troubles.
 I'll maybe get bit
 By that Green-Headed Quail
 On the place where I sit.
 But I've bought a big bat.
 I'm all ready, you see.
 Now my troubles are going
 To have troubles with *me!* (57)

The difference this time is that the protagonist now enables itself to commit violence. Seuss textually translates the trauma of the journey, as Kaplan describes, into a “language of acceptance”—which in this case is in the form of the rhetoric and visual conventions of popular children’s literature. The text encourages the reader to forgo repression or denial and deliberately keep its “wound open” in what it presents as a seemingly healthy, acceptable way: the character briefly mourns its plight and current

trauma, acknowledges the violence of the past, and then moves forward—now fully enabled to deal with future trauma by any means necessary (it now carries a bat). The text dramatizes, confronts, suggests a method of resolution for, and ostensibly invites the reader to learn from and vicariously experience the pain of its protagonist.

It is not so much that *I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew* is an example of watered-down, inoculative “horror” for kids. However, what I do propose is the fact that Dr. Seuss, horror media, inoculative nonfiction, “reality” TV, the drama of tragedy or cruelty, and many other texts operate similarly in their regular deployment of rhetorical pre-memory structures, which suggests that the category of pre-memory is nothing less than a fundamental building block of human pedagogy. Since fear, pain, and death are the only truly universal human conditions, then it seems literary criticism will never escape the compelling desire and emotional need to understand people and confront their trauma. Though economists sometimes claim that all human interaction falls under the umbrella of their discipline, perhaps the similar near-ubiquity of the structure of pre-memory suggests that much of human learning falls under the field of trauma studies—much more, perhaps, than most people would care to admit, lest they be forced to face trauma they rather would repress. “Should you feel fear?” asks de Becker, “The question is irrelevant, for there is no should about it. Of course you will feel fear when there is reason to, like it or not. [. . .] Fear is, and is supposed to be. Start there, accept it” (*Fear Less* 7-8). The potential for inoculation, via text or syringe, is all around us; indeed, it is a foundational mechanic for the way we learn. And maybe, if we

are lucky, then it will help us lessen or understand our own personal exposure to the
“residues of trauma.”

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