Navigating Trauma in the English Classroom

Adam Wolfsdorf, Kristen Park Wedlock, and Cassandra Lo
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"It’s hard to believe in coincidence, but it’s even harder to believe in anything else."

—John Green, *Will Grayson, Will Grayson*

The funny thing about this book is that it wasn’t even our idea. We weren’t planning on writing a book; we were planning on a presentation. Even that isn’t entirely accurate. We were ambivalent. It was COVID—the universe had paired us together in a joint NCTE session . . . on Zoom! We didn’t know each other. Actually, Cassie and Kristen knew each other. They had worked together for two years at Georgian Court University. But I (Adam) didn’t know them, and they didn’t know me. We had applied for NCTE’s 2020 ¡Confluencia! Conference, and NCTE had determined our thinking was analogous—that our visions on trauma and pedagogy were aligned and should cohabitate. But even that wasn’t enough. Honestly, we’d been on the fence . . . presenting on Zoom . . . “maybe wait until 2021” . . . but then the second coincidence came—the one that finally flung us together, concretizing an inevitable partnership that, prior to that moment, hadn’t really been a partnership at all.

On November 6 of 2020—a Friday—while I was quarantining in agrarian northern Connecticut, and Cassie and Kristen sheltered in place sixty miles from each other in their respective homes in New Jersey, an email came in that instantaneously obliterated whatever distance had separated us. At 10:19 p.m., while I sat on my sofa streaming season six of the *Great British Bake Off* . . . while Kristen nodded off putting her daughter, Shae, to bed . . . while Cassie remained riveted to CNN and the election results that
would decide the fate of the world for the next four years... Robb Clouse of NCTE clicked send on his mousepad, delivering the following message that would unite Kristen, Cassie, and me forever:

I’m interested in learning a bit more about your co-presentation at our upcoming Confluencia convention—Trauma in the College English/Composition Class—and the possibility of a professional book on the topic... depending of course on the focus, your interest, etc. I’m curious how it may be similar to or different from other approaches, the research base and, if you are indeed interested in publishing on the topic, how that might be further developed (single author, coauthored narrative, edited, etc.). I’d love to learn more—the topic of trauma continues to receive increasing attention in K–12 schools and concomitantly teacher education courses, and we may well still be ahead of the curve a bit with the latter. (November 6, 2020)

Life is a funny thing. Its best and worst moments often come at us out of nowhere. We hope for the promotion. We fear the cancer diagnosis. We pray for the big raise. We tremble at the unexpected car crash, the hospitalization, the foreclosure. But life doesn’t unfold like that. It doesn’t obey our hopes and fears. It doesn’t hold a mirror up to our deepest desires and our most lurid trepidations—it gives us new ones we haven’t anticipated. Hedwig delivers Harry’s invitation to attend school at Hogwarts. Lucy feels snow at the back of the wardrobe. Khalil gets shot. Amir watches Hassan in the alleyway. Dorothy reunites with Auntie Em. Almost everything miraculous and devastating in life falls outside of our expectations. We fear this, we get that. We strive for this, but then that happens. It’s why we live, and it’s why we read, too—because we don’t know what happens on the next page.

In 2015, I was a Teaching Fellow in Kenyon College’s summer writing workshop for teachers. On the second-to-last day of the program, I attended a talk lead by David Lynch, editor-in-chief of the Kenyon Review. David spoke about writing: “good writing will surprise you even when you know what is about to happen” (August 12, 2015). The same is true for life. Even when we know the plot, the plot will upend us, sweep us off of our feet, and land us upside down in a pile of “how did that happen?!?”

When Robb Clouse sent that email, it initiated a convoluted, carnivalesque marathon sequence of events that would begin with Zoom call ideas, introductions, and awkward beginnings and would materialize into 150-plus pages of words, words, words. We were interested in trauma. We knew that. We were living through a pandemic. We knew that, too. We suspected but didn’t know for sure—or have any real way of predicting—that our ideas,
formulations, and conceptualizations about trauma would align and interconnect in ways that felt spontaneous, dynamic, and, ultimately, cohesive.

Lastly—and perhaps most important—we knew English teachers were struggling. We’d spoken with them about their experiences navigating trauma in the English classroom. We had our own uncertainties, ambivalences, confusions, and despairs. Trauma was real. Trauma was everywhere, and it wasn’t going away. If anything, as the months of the pandemic labored on, it was getting worse. What would the English classroom look like on the other side of Zoom living? How would we prepare for it? What did we owe to our students and to ourselves? And what about the thousands of other English teachers and professors across the country? What would they do, and how would they do it?

Perhaps English teachers had read about it? Perhaps they had gone to workshops or participated in faculty development training sessions? But from conversations we’d had with colleagues—and from our personal research—it seemed clear that there was a problem: students had trauma histories, texts dealt with trauma, but English teachers had not been given sufficient training when it came to thinking about, responding to, and engendering classroom environments and cultures where trauma could be assimilated and dignified without being parceled into overly prescribed "solutions" that felt either too conveniently simple or too frustratingly convoluted and vague.

So, that’s what we are trying to do in these pages: to talk about trauma as it relates to the English classroom. This book will not be perfect. It will not turn you into a world-renowned trauma therapist. It will not, necessarily, even make you better capable of handling trauma in the English classroom. It might make all of this even more difficult, confusing, perplexing, and disorienting. But we do believe that your choice to read this book says something important about you—that you are reading this because you care about your students and seek to learn more about how you can support, understand, and help them. Furthermore, we hope your journey into these pages will allow you to feel more at ease and masterful when it comes to the highly complex and layered experience of teaching English within a community of individuals, many of whom may have been traumatized, some of whom suffer from PTSD.

If we can do that . . . if we can be the 150-plus pages that help you feel more prepared to handle students in crisis who get triggered, retraumatized, or volunteer personal narratives of trauma in your classrooms, then we believe we will have succeeded in our collective attempt at writing about a topic that, like the dragon in so many mythical legends, cannot quite be slain. Among Cassie, Kristen, and I, we believe that understanding trauma and learning to work with it represents the journey of a thousand miles. We hope this book proves to be one of the important steps you take en route. And even if there is no exact destination, together we can help each other traverse a treacherous landscape that, even if it does not lead us all the way back to Kansas, invariably may bring us a little bit closer to home.
Consumption
What Is Trauma, and Why Should We Care?

What is trauma? Why should we care? How can we think about it, and in what ways does it play out in our classrooms? In the following chapter, I (Adam Wolfsdorf), attempt to look at and answer these highly complicated, layered, and nuanced questions. As English teachers, we are—perhaps more than any other type of educator—uniquely positioned to share content and receive student narratives that center around trauma. And yet what structures, educative tools, and practices currently exist that prioritize trauma awareness and education for English teachers? This chapter will begin the exploration of trauma in its many levels, layers, and dimensions. It will serve as a springboard for the rest of the book, beginning a journey that has no real beginning and may, in fact, never end. That said, here goes! Welcome to Navigating Trauma in the English Classroom.

If anyone on the verge of action should judge himself according to the outcome, he would never begin. Even though the result may gladden the whole world, that cannot help the hero; for he knows the result only when the whole thing is over, and that is not how he became a hero, but by virtue of the fact that he began.

—Søren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling

In 1999, the first year I ever taught English in a classroom, I was teaching American literature to a group of high school juniors. We were reading Jack London’s short story "To Build a Fire," one of the first narratives written about Alaska. For those who have not read it, "To Build a Fire" tells the story of a newcomer to the region, an unnamed man who sets out to complete a full day’s hike on the Yukon Trail in the middle of a frigid winter. The temperature on the day of the journey is minus 75 degrees, 107
degrees below the freezing point. Foolish and thoughtless, the man sojourns on despite multiple warnings. He is accompanied only by his dog, the Alaskan husky. As the man mindlessly trudges forward, the dog senses that the journey is perilous. It is a cautionary tale about man’s ignorance and hubris in the face of nature’s superior power.

For as long as I live, I will never forget what Sarah Windsor did that day. As we were engaging in close reading and discussing the text, Sarah suddenly raised her hand. She was a timid girl who did not often speak in class. Although she was not poor, she tended to dress in a disheveled manner. She had matted brown hair that was usually frizzy and unwashed. When her hand rose, I could sense the eagerness—she had something very important to say.

"Yes?"

"I just find it . . . " she began and then had to gather herself to speak because she was almost shaking. "I just find it so horrible what this man is doing to that dog."

She took a breath. "He just . . . he just keeps abusing it and abusing it. It’s like he won’t stop."

Her classmates turned to her. Taken by her intent interest and focus, I also found myself suddenly captured by her interpretation.

To be clear, there is no specific language in London’s story that suggests the man is actively abusing the animal. One could argue the very fact that he forces the dog into such inhospitable conditions is an act of abuse—and it may very well be—but Sarah seemed to be suggesting a different type of abuse: a hostility and active mistreatment that might be analogous to the type of thing a child suffers when she is being beaten by a parent at home.

Suddenly something clicked in my brain. This wasn’t about the literature. It wasn’t about Alaska, Jack London, or the Yukon Trail. It was about Sarah. She seemed to be trying to tell me something, to tell the whole class. She seemed to be confessing that something horrible was happening at home. What that something was, I have no idea. I never found out, and I never will. But she had opened a door and allowed me to peek into whatever disturbance was operating in the secret chambers of her home life. I had become, for the briefest of moments, a witness to Sarah’s trauma.

As we continued to read and discuss the text, and, indeed, for the rest of the year, I could not help but wonder what type of sadistic treatment Sarah might be enduring at home. Whenever she showed up for my class, the thought percolated at the back of my mind. When I passed her in the halls, it was there, too. But it was vague. Even now, as I sit here writing this book twenty-three years later, the thought still tingles in my brain. If Sarah somehow were the victim of a perpetration that the text was somehow triggering in her, then what was I, as her English teacher, supposed to do? In the most innocuous sense, she was merely giving a literary interpretation—a reading of sorts. Should I have asked her to more specifically divulge what she had begun to share? Should I have headed over to consult the school’s guidance counselor.
based on a comment she had made about Jack London’s man and his dog? Should I have let it go? Turned a blind eye? I had twenty other students in that class to worry about. And four other classes as well, each with twenty or more students in them. Was it appropriate to move in? What if I did, and she ended up telling me her father was sadistically beating her? Or raping her? Or . . .

All this occurred almost a quarter-century ago. Trauma, as Ray Kinsella states in Field of Dreams, wasn’t even a "glint in (my) eye" (Robinson, 1989). I hadn’t written fifteen articles on trauma in the English classroom. I wasn’t the Humanities Chair at an independent school I helped to build and develop. I hadn’t spent three years directing a master’s program in teaching of English at Columbia University. I hadn’t been on faculty at NYU, where I train English teachers at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. I hadn’t served as a Visiting Assistant Professor in the graduate liberal studies program at Wesleyan University. I hadn’t endured two and a half years researching and writing my dissertation, which looked at trigger warnings in relation to literature. (Trigger warnings weren’t even a "thing" that educators talked about.) And I hadn’t written this book. The person who taught "To Build a Fire" to Sarah Windsor was a first-year English teacher just trying to figure out the classroom. Grading my first papers. Creating my first seating charts. Figuring out my own life. Trauma . . . I had no idea what trauma did to people, how it could get triggered in the English classroom, or what to do about it if it did. I had gone into the field on a whim—I loved reading; I loved writing; I adored working with students. I wasn’t married. I didn’t have two children. I was making thirty thousand dollars.

But even then, in the infancy of my own professional development, I knew what Sarah had communicated about the man and the dog was significant. I knew that once I understood what she was telling me, I would spend the rest of that academic year knowing something painful about her life. If I put Sarah’s confession on a balance against my hopes and dreams for what these students might learn and discover in my American literature class, it seemed fairly clear to me, even then, that Sarah’s story was far more important and troubling than anything I had diagrammed in my curriculum. All of this I realized. But what I did not know was what to do with what I had learned.

In the course of a lifespan, most people will confront trauma. Even for those fortunate enough to come from secure homes with loving, supportive parents, trauma is a fairly predictable eventuality. From Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire to the Civil War, Emancipation, and even today, with a seemingly ceaseless global pandemic and a Russian invasion of the Ukraine, this has always been the case. From the big T traumas such as car accidents, domestic abuse, global pandemics, sexual assault, racial discrimination, and teaching
and learning behind masks, to the small traumas of recurrent emotional abuse, bullying, break-ups, and microaggressions, trauma is a force that places a considerable burden on our lives (Howell and Itzkowitz, 2016). Sometimes there is more. Sometimes there is less, but always it is there—not a maybe but a definitely, a fact of life, even a rite of passage for the individual who walks through the world and comes to understand and experience it in all its vicissitudes.

In *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, Bessel van der Kolk argues that trauma changes the brain (2015). Heinz Kohut believed that trauma shatters the individual, fragmenting the self, such that the resources at hand are insufficient to meet the demands of the moment (1984). Martin Heidegger believed in the existential analytic, the idea that trauma is built into the natural architecture of life. Just as we will experience joy for the birth of a new child, feel inspired by an extraordinary painting, or laugh uncontrollably at an exquisitely clever joke, so too will we grieve and shudder at a sudden and unanticipated horror: the loss of a loved one, the doctor’s diagnosis of cancer, the witnessing of a racial injustice. As Khalil Gibran notes in *The Prophet*, our joys and our sorrows are often interwoven and interconnected: "Your joy is your sorrow unmasked. And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was often filled with your tears" (33). In *Hamlet*, the Player King speaks: "Where joy most revels, grief doth most lament; / Grief joys, joy grieves, on slender accident" (3.2.198–99). Robert Stolorow, the psychoanalyst and philosopher who lost his wife to cancer, referred to trauma as "the unbearable embeddedness of being" (22). Buddhist psychiatrist Mark Epstein, a clinical assistant professor at NYU, stated, "If we’re not suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, we’re suffering from pre-traumatic stress disorder" (2013).

And yet, despite its prevalence, trauma is still tinged with a sense of the taboo. The student survivors in our classrooms will often feel shame, doubt, and inferiority. They will sequester their traumas in private spaces, locked away, believing they will be shunned, ostracized, or held responsible for the perpetrations of others. For a Sarah Windsor, who may have endured significant abuse at home, why does this shame exist, and why do survivors feel obliged to suffer in silence rather than opening up and setting their burdens free?

This denial of trauma—a psychological silencing of the lambs—is a reality of mainstream education. Although our classrooms are peopled with individuals who come to us with a history of sexual, physical, emotional, and racial abuse, so little is done to prepare educators for the classrooms that they teach and the survivors they are bound to serve. Research conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicate that:

(O)ne in five Americans was sexually molested as a child; one in four was beaten by a parent to the point of a mark being left on their body; and one in three couples engages in physical violence. A quarter of us grew up with alcoholic relatives, and one out of eight witnessed their mother being beaten or hit. (van der Kolk, 2015, 1)
If we extrapolate these statistics to the seventy-five million students who people our kindergarten through doctoral level programs in the United States, we can conclude that roughly fifteen million students have been sexually molested; almost nineteen million have been beaten by a parent; another roughly nineteen million have grown up among alcoholic relatives; and close to ten million have witnessed their mother being beaten or hit.ii

Let’s pare that down further to make it even more personally relevant. I teach in New York. The average New York City classroom accommodates thirty-five students. If the CDC’s data are accurate, then here are my stats:

- 7 have been sexually molested
- 9 have been beaten
- 12 have parents who engage in physical violence
- 9 have grown up among alcoholic relatives
- 4 have witnessed their mother being beaten

In fact, in urban populations where there might be higher stress levels and increased incidents of domestic violence and abuse, the numbers may be higher.

A majority of teacher education and teacher training programs focus disproportionately on content and curriculum. Even the prestigious doctoral program that I graduated from in 2017 concentrated almost exclusively on pedagogy in terms of its relationship to content—esthetic techniques for teaching poetry, short stories, and novels. I loved the program; I loved my professors; and I am a far better educator as a result of that experience. But there was not a single required course aimed at helping doctoral students understand the psychology of students who come to us carrying the wounds and bandages of abuse and trauma. Somehow, the mental health realities of students are recognized (if they are recognized at all) as the purview of school psychologists and on-site social workers.

In my twenty-three-year career working with and training English teachers, I’ve found that too many are absolutely baffled by how to handle, think about, or respond to student trauma when it becomes obvious that an individual in their classroom has been triggered (Wolfsdorf, 2017). During my doctoral research, I interviewed an English department chair with fifteen-plus years of teaching experience. An impressively fluid thinker, he became completely tongue-tied when I asked him what his position was on trigger warnings when teaching literature. Following a thirty-eight-second silence, the veteran teacher stumbled through almost four minutes of completely incomprehensible ideas, filled with numerous "ums," a handful of contradictions, and several more strange, unsettling pauses. In all of its verbal disfluency, the response said so much: he did not feel equipped to handle trauma in his English classroom. Nor did he know how to train his own English faculty on how to respond to student trauma when it surfaced. He was not alone.
To be clear, trauma is something that all educators face in the classroom. And yet the question of trauma may be especially significant for English teachers—particularly for English teachers and professors working at the secondary and post-secondary levels, where students are beginning to develop the cognitive capacities for recognizing and paying testimony to their personal narratives. Unlike less aesthetically charged content spaces (Rosenblatt, 1938; Greene, 1988) such as chemistry, math, and statistics (and none of this is said to take anything away from these centrally important and meaningful fields), English dives deliberately into an experiential dyadic with the very soul of trauma. Hester Prynne stands upon the scaffold. Alison Bechdel discovers that her father is gay. Sethe gets raped. Lolita is kidnapped and repeatedly molested. Hamlet contemplates suicide. Elison’s protagonist, an unnamed black man, is the victim of repeated racial trauma. When the English teacher cracks open the spine of the novel, a continuous sequence of traumatic narrative will unfold: Ishmael, Nick, Celie, Gregor Samsa . . . these are the literary protagonists who pay testimony (Felman and Laub, 1991). The stories they tell are rife with conflict and filled with hardship. As I wrote in a 2019 article for English Journal:

It’s hard to imagine a single literary text worth teaching to high school students that doesn’t delve deeply into some controversial topic. Take Hamlet, for instance: What happens if the Danish prince does not contemplate his own mortality, if Claudius does not kill Hamlet Sr., and if Ophelia does not end up drowning herself in a pool of tears? Gatsby: unrequited love, obsession, murder, substance abuse. Huck Finn: slavery, racism, abusive parenting, and religious indoctrination. In the high school classroom, controversy equals opportunity. One of the roles of the high school English teacher is to be courageous enough to bring elephants into the classroom—heavily laden topics so incendiary that they shake students from the comforts of their normative experiences, push them to reconsider their own ideologies, and—through significant, intelligent risk—bring about real changes in thought and experience. (29)

The type of literary texts we teach in the English classroom nosedive directly into traumatic spaces. The words are often beautiful, the language exquisite, but peel away the linguistic beauty, and what lurks beneath is often the leviathan (Hobbes, 1962). Though not a therapist—and it is very important to clarify that the English teacher should not attempt to play the role of mental health professional—the English teacher will often teach texts that narrate the type of traumatic circumstances that shatter people’s lives, stress characters beyond what they can tolerate, and fundamentally alter their ability to feel safe and cohesive in the world (Kohut and Golberg, 1984).
And our students will respond to what they read. Most will be able to tolerate the intensity. Many, even if they have experienced analogous traumas to the characters on the page, will cope just fine, may benefit therapeutically from the work—such as Yana. Mere months after her father’s sudden death, I taught Yana *Hamlet*. Because Yana came to class consistently, was a dedicated and hard-working student, and reliably contributed to class discussions and maintained an A average, I had no idea she was coping with a tremendous loss. I only found out about the loss after we’d completed the play. Yana showed up to office hours, asking me if I would read her college essay. When I read the essay, I almost fell out of my chair: it was a narrative about her father’s recent death. I’d spent the past ten weeks rhapsodizing over the beauty and profundity of *Hamlet*, completely oblivious to Yana’s pain. The following day, I approached Yana with shame, eager to check in and see whether reading the play had unwittingly retraumatized her (Wolfsdorf, 2021). To my great relief, Yana relayed that reading *Hamlet* in the wake of her father’s death had felt therapeutic, a valuable way for her to process the loss. But perhaps Yana was unusually resilient? What about other students who read and write about texts that tap into their personal traumas? Will such encounters with reading and writing feel therapeutic for them, too, or retraumatizing?

I’m reminded of Alison, who needed to walk out of my classroom at Teachers College because I showed a video featuring a car crash. I would discover that Alison had suffered a near fatal car crash the previous year. These stories are not unusual. As Elizabeth Dutro explains in her article "That’s Why I Was Crying on This Book’: Trauma as Testimony in Response to Literature" (2008): “I was 16, sitting in junior English, when my teacher, with her usual style and drama, began reading the first lines of Karl Shapiro’s poem about sudden trauma, the tragedy of innocent lives cut short” (423). It was Dutro’s first week back in the classroom following her younger brother’s death, and the poem was simply too much for her to process at the time. As we move through this book, we will hear more stories about student survivors who are asked to sit through exposures to literary content that directly mirrors some of their own traumatic experiences. Is this good? Bad? Therapeutic? Harmful? Regardless of what it is, it is *inevitable*, and we need to know how to handle it.

And it is precisely the inevitability of trauma’s place in the English classroom that makes this book so essential. We cannot—and must not—attempt to sanitize or whitewash our classrooms. We must not ban books or censor content. As English teachers, our job is difficult; the narratives we teach often contain extreme and triggering content. Oedipus, Ophelia, Paul Baumer, Esther Greenwood—are characters who face intense circumstances. And yet, it is perhaps because of their hardships and not in spite of them that these characters and their worlds demand our attention. As Maya Angelou writes in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the hardest and most devastating stories are the ones that need to be told: "there is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you" (2008).
As English teachers, our job is paradoxical. Though in life, it is wise to actively avoid trauma, in the English classroom, we deliberately seek it out, finding the books, the poems, and the plays that give trauma the opportunity to speak. Look at Khaled Hosseini’s opening to 2003’s *The Kite Runner:*

I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975. I remember the precise moment, crouching behind a crumbling mud wall, peeking into the alley near the frozen creek. That was a long time ago, but it’s wrong what they say about the past, I’ve learned, about how you can bury it. Because the past claws its way out. Looking back now, I realize I have been peeking into that deserted alley for the last twenty-six years. (1)

It is the novel, invariably, that gives the caged bird the right, at last, to sing. Ishmael. Sonny. Nick Carraway. Pecola Breedlove. They give testimony and we, the reader, serve as witness (Felman and Laub, 1991). As the story is told, the will to know and to utter aloud overcomes the will to deny, abstain, shield, or hide. As Theodore Reik states: "(t)he repressed memory is like a noisy intruder being thrown out of the concert hall. You can throw him out, but he will bang on the door and continue to disturb the concert. The analyst opens the door and says, 'if you promise to behave yourself, you can come back in'" (Reik as quoted in Mack, 2014, 43). When the caged bird sings, it breaks the silence that nullifies it. As Judith Herman writes in *Trauma and Recovery:* "(t)he conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma" (1).

Every day in classrooms throughout the United States, English teachers share these stories with their students: "Shooting an Elephant," *Orpheus and Eurydice, Beloved.* The trauma is ripped open and entered into, thirty-five students and a teacher in a 900 square-foot classroom. Desks in a row. Lithonia lighting overhead. Two windows slightly ajar. The sound of wind cutting through the leaves and honking taxi cabs. Johnny’s staring at Suzy. Wendy’s got a headache. Jamil’s biting his lower lip. Tyrelle daydreams. Sal’s asleep. Marty and Rick text underneath their desks. Phillip, Sean, and Jennifer are tuned in while Dr. Davis reminds them that things fall apart, and the center cannot hold. Ophelia’s losing her mind. Ahab hunts the white whale. They’re reading about a trauma, but they don’t even know it. They’re in the belly of the whale, and nobody realizes that their name is Jonah.

And students have their stories as well. At times, they will write essays analyzing the green light or examining industrialization and economics in *Death of a Salesman.* But other times they will speak to us from the shadows of their own personal lives. They will tell us about their father’s problems with alcohol, about the time they were sexually assaulted, or about their own forays into drugs or illicit sexual behavior. Either unwittingly or intentionally,
they will convey their secrets. And in these moments, the traditional structure of teacher/student dynamics will break down—like it did with Sarah Windsor—because what is being shared goes beyond footnotes, grammar, spelling, and punctuation. And once these boundaries are broken, in some ways they will always be broken. If Jamilla tells us she has been raped, or Juan writes about the time his father threw him onto the floor and whipped him with a belt, we as English teachers cannot simply choose to unlearn what we’ve learned. For both the student who shares and the teacher who listens, the relaying of the traumatic event represents an act that is often indelible.

**WHAT THIS IS AND WHAT IT'S NOT**

The central argument of this book is that English teachers who understand trauma-informed pedagogy (Dutro, 2008; Felman and Laub, 1992) are far better off, both for their curricular content and for their students, than are English teachers who do not take the time to learn about how trauma operates and can get triggered through reading and writing. And yet, while we argue for English teachers to become trauma informed, we also emphasize that we are not advocating English teachers attempt to play the role of the therapist. Though it may be tempting at times, and though our students may seem to need us—or we may feel attracted to the idea of helping them in this way—we are by no means qualified to take on this role. My wife is a clinical psychologist. She spent seven years in graduate school, did four years of externship, one year of internship, and an additional year of trauma-specific fellowship training. She is a director of training for psychologists at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City. And even now, in her fifteenth year of practice, she gets supervision and is supported by a team when she is handling the complicated trauma of some of her patients.

Cassie, Kristen, and I are not attempting to compel you to hand in your favorite novels and open up a private counseling practice. We know our limitations; we hope you recognize yours as well. As my former mentor and dear friend, Sheridan Blau, once explained to me, "the English classroom should be therapeutic but not therapy.” Navigating the fine line between responsible, empathetic teaching and indulgent, unproductive enmeshment is one that takes English teachers years to master, if they master it at all. We must, of course, be warm, sensitive, and student centered, but we must also know how to create firm boundaries and some level of empathetic distance so that our students know we care but do not get seduced by the idea that we are here to treat and heal them.

We do not need to heal students or be their therapists in order to use what we know about trauma to foster English classrooms where students are better attended to, embraced,
and served. The extensive research that Cassie, Kristen, and I have done on English teachers navigating trauma in their classrooms has made it increasingly clear that a book of this nature is filling a significant need. In recent years, the issue of trigger warnings and their relative value (more on this in chapters 2 and 3) has highlighted a desperate need in educational circles to provide some measure of security and perceived safety for student survivors. Unlike any previous time in history, the matter of student mental health has become a priority (Wolfsdorf, 2018; Wolfsdorf, Scott, and Herzog, 2019; Wolfsdorf, 2021), and this was true even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic that has gripped the world for more than two years. Student mental health remains a significant feature of classrooms throughout America.

As we have become more "trauma conscious" (van der Kolk, 2015, 349), and as the taboos attendant to student trauma and mental health have dissolved, an urgency in academic spaces has asserted itself: English teachers (and, really, all teachers) should learn some level of trauma-informed pedagogy. As with the recent acceleration of DEI training that has become ubiquitous, trauma-informed pedagogical practices may be more relevant in the twenty-first-century classroom than ever before. With the disruption to and reconsideration of the white hegemonic patriarchy that has overarched classroom cultures and set arbitrary norms for pedantic curricular aims, concern for the psychological well-being of students has simultaneously advanced itself and become a central feature of progressive pedagogy. With adolescent suicide on the rise, psychopharmacological drugs used by one in every four teenagers, and what will certainly be years or even decades of PTSD for large numbers of students emerging from this pandemic, we as English teachers owe it to our students to become more mindful and aware when establishing classroom cultures that promote growth and empathy for survivors.

In the pages that follow, we will not be so bold as to imagine that we possess the solutions to these incredibly intricate and, at times, intractable issues. But we do hope we might provide a framework and possible ways for English teachers to more comprehensively think about and more confidently account for the type of student responses that can be triggered by exposure to literature or shared (intentionally or unintentionally) through student composition. We hope to help you create a classroom space that encourages deeper inquiry and clearer, braver (Arao and Clemens, 2013) textual encounters, both for the students we teach and for us as educators. Many of the English teachers we have worked with, supervised, and researched have been rattled and confounded by instances of student trauma. Like the students who themselves feel shattered and overwhelmed, many of the English teachers we’ve spoken with have expressed how they feel out of their depth and ineffective. Can this book help you to be more effective? Can it bolster your awareness so that when survivors get triggered in your classroom, you feel you have a steadier, more comprehensive approach? We think the answer is yes.
As we move through this book, we want to make it clear: we are not advocating for neat, packaged, and fully delineated solutions. Given what Cassie, Kristen, and I have learned about trauma, to do so would be a dishonest act, an arbitrary manipulation of an entity that often defies our overt attempts at mastering or completely understanding its messy boundaries and borders. Trauma is a highly complex space. As Susan Banitt writes:

Traumatic events, by definition, overwhelm our ability to cope. When the mind becomes flooded with emotion, a circuit breaker is thrown that allows us to survive the experience fairly intact, that is, without becoming psychotic or frying out one of the brain centers. The cost of this blown circuit is emotion frozen within the body. In other words, we often unconsciously stop feeling our trauma partway into it, like a movie that is still going after the sound has been turned off. We cannot heal until we move fully through that trauma, including all the feelings of the event. (23)

Like many of the trauma-informed pedagogical experts who have come before us (Dutro, Felman and Laub, Britzman, Caruth), we hope our contribution can make the path easier for you. Not fix the road, but give you a better set of boots with which to walk on it.

We believe that if English teachers better understand trauma—how it behaves and misbehaves, how it might get triggered, and what it does to our students and ourselves—then we will most likely be more prepared when students in our English classrooms get triggered by difficult content or seem otherwise shaken, hyper-aroused, or shattered. Like a good boot camp, which does not prevent war but rather prepares you for it, we hope the pages that follow will serve as a training ground to take you deeper into the complex layers of trauma, shining a light into that dark space, Virgiling your Dante in the descent to more fully understand trauma’s underworld.

THE ROAD AHEAD

Structurally, this book is divided into three main sections. Part One of this book, Consumption, will focus primarily on reading literature. It will provide a comprehensive overview of trauma: what it is, how it operates, and why understanding it can help English teachers become more empathetic and responsive when student trauma gets triggered by encounters with literary content that runs analogous to student experiences. To do so, I will provide a brief history of trauma, both within and beyond the classroom, and
attempt to provide the reader with a heightened sense of utility when it comes to the educator's ability to recognize, conceptualize, and respond to student trauma, should it surface. In Part One, I will also focus on trigger warnings and demonstrate how content warnings, though well intended, may not provide the comprehensive "protection" they claim. Finally, I will demonstrate through sharing case studies involving former students how engaging with literature can trigger as well as prove therapeutic for traumatized survivors.

Part Two, Declaration, considers the impact trauma has on classroom relationships, assignments, and writings. It will highlight the importance of relationship building between teachers and students, especially when engaging students in activities and assignments that could be triggering. Part Two will also focus on how composition and writing activities can serve as areas for witness and testimony within the English classroom, and how instruction around "high stakes" assignments such as the college essay can support students when they write about difficult topics. Additionally, Part Two will address how to respond to and assess trauma narratives by proposing feedback strategies and rubrics that acknowledge the risks students take when sharing deeply personal stories.

While Part One and Part Two lay the groundwork for defining what trauma is and how it shows up in the texts we read, the papers we grade, and the classrooms we lead, Part Three, Embodiment, emphasizes the inner work required of instructors who choose to engage in trauma-informed pedagogy. Just as consuming literature helps the reader understand the relationship of a character to their trauma narrative, meditation invites a person (the educator in this case) to understand their relationship to their personal story—attracted, averted, attached, detached, nonattached, embodied, disembodied. Part Three shares the neuroscience of meditation and the cognitive science of memory to unpack the way that trauma registers in the body-mind-heart and how people can learn to read their personal trauma narratives. While trauma disrupts the projected arc of the story, meditation interrupts the attachments to stories. Techniques from contemplative arts are offered for replenishing the individual instructor, whereas techniques from narrative medicine are shared for building resilient communities of instructors. Finally, Part Three closes with a section addressing the concept of teacher burnout, ultimately proposing instructor self-care and community support as potential antidotes.

Although we acknowledge and recognize that trauma awareness, mindfulness, and recovery should be thought of as a lifelong process, one replete with a myriad of components and foundational elements, we hope this book will be experienced by its readers as one of the formative texts that facilitated and shaped the sojourner's authentic quest for better understanding, rethinking, and ultimately deeper comfort with both the burdens and opportunities endemic to working with traumatic experiences in the classroom.