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Sean Travers

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“SCeptical Scriptotherapy and Fantastical Metaphors”: Trauma in Brit Marling and Zal Batmanglij’s *The OA* (2016-2019)

Sean Travers

Introduction

This article examines the representation of trauma in Brit Marling and Zal Batmanglij’s Science Fiction (SF) television series *The OA* (2016-2019). Specifically, I explore how the series uniquely employs the supernatural to explore rather than repress the trauma of marginalised groups. I illustrate how *The OA* does this in two ways: first, by reading the series through a technique that I term sceptical scriptotherapy and, second, by analysing *The OA*’s depiction of the “Movements.” The Movements are the interconnectivity abilities developed by *The OA*’s diverse cast of characters, which I argue formulate fantastical metaphors to depict marginalised trauma specifically. To demonstrate this, I apply a number of prominent trauma theories and concepts to *The OA*, including narrative fragmentation, dissociation, communal healing, secondary trauma, and transmission. Ultimately, this analysis examines how *The OA* both challenges and contributes to cultural trauma criticism (particularly how the series adds to feminist trauma theory) and uncovers new ways to represent trauma experienced by marginalised groups. Before conducting this study, it is necessary to address the following: my definition of sceptical scriptotherapy and how this concept differs to traditional notions of scriptotherapy; why sceptical scriptotherapy is an important and relevant framework through which to read the trauma of marginalised characters; and the theories I draw upon in formulating my concept of sceptical scriptotherapy (primarily Suzette Henke’s concept of sceptical scriptotherapy and the work of such feminist trauma theorists as Laura S. Brown).

A dominant critical conception regarding trauma recovery is that healing can only take place when survivors tell what Judith Herman calls “the story of the trauma” (175). That is, sharing and narrating traumatic events exactly as they happened are essential for recovery. Laurie Vickroy advocates the “healing function of literature” (8), while Shoshana Felman insists that the act of writing about trauma is “an essential element of working through [the] experience” (54). Most significantly, Suzette Henke in *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women’s Life-Writing* (2000) has coined the term “scriptotherapy,” which refers to writing about a traumatic experience for the purposes of healing “the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic re-enactment” (xii-xiii). Sceptical scriptotherapy, then, is a type of writing that features characters consciously reworking traumatic events into fantastical alternatives rather

than relaying them exactly as they happened. Sceptical scriptotherapy differs from more traditional methods of scriptotherapy in a number of ways. First, unlike traditional methods of sceptical scriptotherapy, these fantastical narratives are represented as therapeutic and successful means of healing rather than being futile, as per convention in trauma fiction. In stereotypical trauma fiction, characters' imaginings of alternate and supernatural scenarios are conventionally represented and read as unhelpful responses to trauma and as a way of denying agency for perpetrator protagonists. Second, sceptical scriptotherapy uniquely employs a dual narrative structure and is ambiguous in terms of the veracity of its supernatural content. Third, sceptical scriptotherapy is suitable for analysing marginalised groups in particular, those for whom trauma is structural and beyond individuals' control. For marginalised groups, imagination is presented as the only means at their disposal that is not subject to such traumas.

Conversely, the concept of sharing and narrating traumatic events has been disputed, with Alan Gibbs in *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives* (2014) noting that testimony is not always shown to heal trauma in fiction; that in specific texts characters are represented as either further traumatised having narrated past events – Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000) – or as preferring to forget traumatic events over therapeutic remembering – Lorrie Moore's *A Gate at the Stairs* (2009). Certain psychological studies of trauma take a similar approach, specifically by incorporating Fredrick Nietzsche's concept of 'active forgetting' whereby an individual, society, or culture heals by forgetting a traumatic memory (Aydin 125; Ramadanovic n.p.). Gibbs also highlights works of traumatic metafiction (*House of Leaves*) whereby a text "interrogates the possibility about writing trauma" and dramatises the "difficulties of constructing" a trauma narrative and thus challenges "accepted theories regarding the representation of trauma" (87, 89, 90). It is important to note that trauma narratives are generally defined as texts which incorporate trauma as a theme, usually featuring a traumatised protagonist or centring on a traumatic event (such as natural disaster). While not all trauma narratives are necessarily about dealing with trauma and trauma recovery, this is a frequent focus of such texts. Trauma texts which incorporate Henke's concept of scriptotherapy, then, will feature a character who experiences a trauma, narrates the traumatic event and shares it with others, and heals as a result. Sceptical scriptotherapy therefore straddles these two approaches: representations of therapeutic remembering and representations that interrogate this practice.

Stereotypical trauma texts are frequently phallogocentric and centre on straight white male protagonists (Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), and Rebecca Roanhorse's *Black Sun* (2020)). For example, in post-World War Two American war literature, the primary focus frequently lies on the trauma experienced by the veterans and invading US forces instead of the trauma suffered by the civilians resulting from military action. The traumatic symptoms of the soldiers, such as guilt stemming from their committed atrocities and their nightmares and flashbacks of these events, are foregrounded. By contrast, the traumatic experiences of the civilians such as the daily threat of rape and murder are either briefly referred to in asides or reduced almost to the level of statistics, described along the lines of 'x number of burnt or decomposing bodies.' *Slaughterhouse-Five* describes in detail the nightmares and hallucinations suffered by the novel's

traumatised soldier protagonist Billy Pilgrim, such as his imaginings of alien abduction. Conversely, there are brief references to the digging up of rotting bodies from “hundreds of corpse mines” (204). While traditional methods of sceptical scriptotherapy and a negative view of escapism (whereby it is considered futile and a means of denying agency for trauma perpetrators) is pertinent for reading more traditional, phallogentric trauma fiction then, I argue that sceptical scriptotherapy is more suitable for analysing contemporary, popular trauma representations that feature marginalised characters. By marginalised or minority groups, I refer to those individuals normally left behind by stereotypical trauma narratives including women, ethnic minorities, and the LGBTQ+ community. In works of sceptical scriptotherapy, escapist fantasies are significantly depicted as the only way victim-protagonists can take agency over their recovery and are particularly pertinent to marginalised groups as the types of trauma experienced by such individuals are often structurally beyond their control, primarily involving ‘everyday’ insidious experiences of inequality and oppression.

Trauma culture’s phallogentricism in part stems from cultural trauma theory. Since the early 1980s, trauma has become a central paradigm for reading contemporary American culture, with an extensive range of novels increasingly featuring traumatised protagonists and centring on traumatic events. In terms of cultural trauma theory, Cathy Caruth’s criticism has been very influential. Drawing upon Holocaust Studies, post-structuralism, Sigmund Freud, and the roots of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a concept in the experience of Vietnam veterans, Caruth defines trauma as comprising the experience of a sudden, overwhelming event that is “outside the range of usual human experience” (3). This definition has come under criticism by feminist trauma scholars because it is applicable mainly to white, middle-class men and does not account for the types of traumas frequently experienced by minorities, which tend to be the more insidious, ‘everyday’ traumas resulting from ongoing situations of distress such as domestic violence, child abuse, poverty, and as Michael Rothberg notes “repeated forms of traumatising violence such as sexism, racism and colonialism” (89). Laura S. Brown notes:

the range of human experience becomes the range of what is normal and usual in lives of men of the dominant class; white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men. Trauma is that which disrupts these particular lives, but no other. (104)

Sceptical scriptotherapy, then, provides a new framework for reading these marginalised experiences in contemporary popular culture. Whereas numerous popular works also centre on white male characters, in American popular culture since the early 2000s there has been an increased number of texts concerned with the traumatic experiences of marginalised groups, in addition to trauma texts written by women, people of colour, and LGBTQ+ writers.¹ A number of these more recent, diverse texts also diverge from the aesthetic models and themes found in canonical trauma fiction, generating innovative trauma representations and narratives that are more suitable for the representation of marginalised trauma. For example, superpowers in superhero narratives can be employed as metaphors for symptoms specific to the types of trauma largely experienced by women

– such as mind-control as a metaphor for date rape in *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019), and Yon-Rogg's (Jude Law) suppression of Carol Danvers' (Brie Larson) superpowers as a metaphor for gaslighting in *Captain Marvel* (2019), both underexplored topics in superhero narratives. Due to the increase in diversity and unique trauma representation in popular culture, new, more feminist trauma paradigms such as sceptical scriptotherapy are vital in our reconsideration of the paradigms through which trauma narratives have traditionally been understood and read.

Sceptical scriptotherapy equally uncovers how texts uniquely employ the supernatural, and is significant to wider feminist trauma theory. Regarding the supernatural, there is a long-standing and problematic tradition in American culture to repress ostensibly 'taboo' topics by representing them in supernatural terms as a means of repression. According to Roger Luckhurst in *The Trauma Question* (2008), family violence in American culture is usually presented as "an external evil" and either takes the form of a "marginal figure," or "safely relegated to the supernatural" (117). For Luckhurst "[t]his device means that intra-familial violence is half-acknowledged but at once covered over by exteriorising it in an abjected, monstrous figure defined as the very opposite of the family" (104). He further notes that "[t]his also matches the model of trauma as something done to individuals, an event that breaches the subject from outside, turning them from agents to victims," that is, the idea of escapism as a means of denying agency for perpetrator trauma protagonists noted above (104). Further, when characters displace traumatic events onto the supernatural in conventional trauma literature, the protagonists' otherworldly encounters are frequently products of their imagination, as in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. In popular culture, by contrast, the supernatural depictions of minorities' trauma are generally represented as literally true (*Jessica Jones*, *Captain Marvel*). Works of sceptical scriptotherapy do not conform to either of these approaches. Victim-protagonists are strongly implied to imagine alternate scenarios, but there is more of a hesitation between the realist and supernatural explanations of events than we would normally see in trauma narratives, and the supernatural is presented in a more ambiguous manner. Viewers are presented with two versions of events, which can take the form of a dual narrative: a realist, tragic version of events and a more palatable, supernatural alternative. The idea of taking agency over one's recovery via escapism is significant in relation to female trauma protagonists. This is important to *The OA* because Marling and Batmanglij, the writers of *The OA*, claimed that they aimed to base the series on an 'active' attempt at trauma recovery. Marling and Batmanglij describe the protagonists' actions as "a victim taking agency and ownership over her recovery, with a sense of a mission," rather than keeping her in what they call "the realm of passive victimhood" (Birnbaum n.p.). Marling adds that this is because in stories about abductions and captivity, the focus is usually on the "team of white male law enforcement officers, once again tasked with saving the day," rather than the survivor (n.p.). While traumas including rape and sexual violence are often represented obliquely in supernatural terms, rape scenes nevertheless tend to be depicted graphically and glorify the visuals of sexual violence. Instead, sceptical scriptotherapy is used to explore the traumatic *effects* of such experiences (specifically escapism), which is a focus of more recent, diverse trauma representations in popular culture. My concept of sceptical scriptotherapy, then, provides an original, critical challenge to dominant conceptions of trauma recovery, and a new feminist framework for analysing more innovative and diverse trauma representations found in contemporary popular culture, contributing to feminist trauma criticism.

The OA

The OA is a particularly relevant case study of sceptical scriptotherapy due to its representation of marginalised groups and their experience of trauma. The series centres on a formerly blind woman, Prairie Johnson (Brit Marling), who returns home having been kidnapped for seven years with her sight restored. Now calling herself The OA (the Original Angel), Prairie assembles a group of five locals, four high school boys and their teacher, to whom she reveals her story to recruit their help in rescuing her fellow captives. Prairie was abducted by a scientist named Hap (Jason Issacs) who locked her in an underground glass cage with four other individuals and experimented upon them to research near death experiences (NDEs). These experiments involved repeatedly killing and reviving the inmates via drowning, during which they travelled to alternate dimensions. In these dimensions, the inmates attained knowledge of a dance called the Movements. When executed by five people in unison, the Movements can heal illness, reanimate the dead, and open portals to other dimensions. Having been abandoned by Hap at a country road when Prairie later refuses to work with him, Hap informs her that he will jump dimensions with the remaining four captives. Prairie thus aims to teach the Movements to the five locals (referred to in this article as 'the new five') to transport her to another dimension. Due to the scope of this article, I will only focus on the first season of *The OA*, particularly as it more effectively demonstrates my argument towards sceptical scriptotherapy than the arguably denser second season.²

The OA presents the viewer with two versions of events: a realist, tragic version in which Prairie is delusional or lying, using a SF narrative as a coping mechanism for a more plausible kind of sexual abuse she may have suffered in captivity, or a more palatable, supernatural alternative whereby Prairie is an interdimensional traveller. *The OA* contains both scenes that suggest Prairie is lying and telling the truth; the series presents both scenarios as 'real' and 'false' at different points in the narrative and it is up to the viewer to decide. *The OA* lends credence to Prairie's narrative in a number of ways, including Prairie legitimately regaining her sight with her parents confirming that Prairie was blind as a child. This suggests that Prairie did jump dimensions when she died during Hap's experiments and regained her sight via otherworldly means. Conversely, Prairie's story can be taken as a fabrication and, as Batmanglij notes: "I believe the trauma in [Prairie's] story is true. Maybe she couldn't tell her story as it actually happened" (Birnbaum, n.p.). For instance, the flashback scenes contrast to the sequences set in the present day. Lol Crawley, *The OA*'s director of photography, says that the present-day scenes were shot to look more real, recognisable and "rough-around-the-edge," similar to a documentary or found footage film, and that natural light was employed as much as possible, in addition to a "responsive" handheld camera style (n.p.). Crawley notes that the flashback sequences, conversely, have a more cinematic style, employing classical "slow, tracking and Steadicam" camera movements (n.p.).

Certain scenes also suggest that the inmates are being abused by Hap rather than undergoing experiments. The inmate Scott Wilson (Will Brill) ponders if Prairie had been raped when she attempted to escape, while Hap is frequently shown to leer at Prairie and exhibit jealousy over Prairie and the inmate Homer Robert's closeness (Emory Cohen). Sexual assault is also suggested

in the scene where Hap drags Prairie out of his car, pins her to the ground, cuts parts of her clothes and holds a knife to her neck. This part of the story appears the most difficult for Prairie to relay, as she describes it in a fragmentary manner: "I'm lying there on the grass and I can't move. And then I feel the cold metal of the blade pressed against my throat [...] Skies so big. Trees. And a road. Going somewhere" ("Invisible Self"). Narrative fragmentation is conventionally used to narrate trauma in fiction. Caruth notes that trauma is "unspeakable" which dictates it being represented in experimental forms, in a language that defies our understanding because the dreams and thoughts stemming from traumatic events are "absolutely literal, unassimilable to associative chains of meaning" (5). This approach is termed transmission, and the aim is to make the reader feel as close as possible the symptoms of the text's protagonist. However, as with the employment of the supernatural, when this approach "reaches its extremes," when "the traumatic experience becomes equated solely with the 'unrepresentable'," this results in "a silencing of both experience and representation" (Lowenstein 5). What Gibbs calls an "exclusive valuing of experimental forms" marginalises minority groups in particular, where there is, Gibbs notes, an "urgent political imperative to narrate their traumas in order to educate" readers (26).

The OA arguably subverts this convention but can be read instead in terms of sceptical scriptotherapy, as a marginalised trauma survivor reworking their experience. Prairie appears to revise the incident with Hap as she narrates it. The flashback sequence that plays out for the viewer and that of Prairie's retelling of it almost merge into one another as the scene interchanges rapidly between them, and while there is reference to sexual assault it is not explicitly shown. The scene cuts back to that of Prairie with the new five when Hap pins Prairie to the ground in the flashback. Applying my concept of sceptical scriptotherapy and reading Prairie as revising a traumatic event into a more palatable, supernatural narrative, this scene is significant to feminist trauma theory on 'active' trauma recovery. The dual narratives and the ambiguity of the supernatural align with Janet Walker's trauma theory in relation to film. Walker in *Trauma Cinema: Documenting Incest and the Holocaust* (2005) argues that the realistic mode of representation leaves cinematic texts "within the binaristic paradigm," that is, that memory is either true or false (59). For Walker, formally experimental texts demonstrate that traumatic memory "eludes binaristic 'it happened or it didn't' approaches" and instead straddles the categories of "'fantasy' and 'memory'" ("False Memories" 212). Walker says that trauma representation should acknowledge the "vicissitudes of memory," particularly in regard to experiences such as sexual abuse, and "confront the possibility that some memory claims or aspects of memory claims may indeed be mistaken" (212). She stresses that fantasy does "not belie the truth" of the traumatic event but is "connected to and produced" by it (212).

This approach appears to be taken throughout the series. For instance, the real-life case of Elizabeth Smart's kidnapping plays on Hap's radio, a survivor who famously likened rape to dying (*NBC News* n.p.). Prairie informs the new five that she and the inmates "all died more times than I can count" ("Homecoming"). A further inspiration for the series' SF premise is Raymond Moody's concept of NDEs (Grow n.p.). Marling says that Moody noticed a convergence in near-death experiences: "everybody talks about leaving the body and having this bird's eye point of view and

[...] and then maybe facing the choice of whether or not to return to the body" (Lopez n.p.). Moody's description of NDEs as an out-of-body experience draws strong parallels with dissociative symptoms of sexual abuse and aligns with Walker's theory on active traumatic memory, incorporating further feminist trauma theory on dissociation by Judith Herman. Herman describes rape survivors as feeling "as though the event is not happening to her, as though she is observing it from outside her body" (43). Similarly, the inmate Rachel DeGrasso (Sharon Van Etten) says her NDE in a car accident was like "floating above the car" ("Champion").

In contrast to the conventional employment of the supernatural in trauma representations, the otherworldly metaphor of interdimensional travel is used to explore the psychological effects of abuse, specifically the need for victims to attain a feeling of agency. Hap's inmates imagine an alternative version of events as a means of coping with their abuse and captivity, regaining control over the narrative. Prairie convinces herself that she is not powerless, that the group "aren't captives [...] we aren't lab rats [...] or unlucky. We're angels" ("Away"). The unique concept of angels in the series points to related themes of victimhood including guilt, forgiveness, redemption, and transcendence. A common symptom of abuse-related trauma is that the victim feels responsible for their abuse. Indeed, the wing-like scars on the inmates' backs (Prairie and the group carve symbols representative of the Movements into their skin in case they forget them when they jump dimensions) are indicative of self-harm. Furthermore, rather than having Prairie transcribe her experience in a realistic or supernatural manner that transforms Hap into a monstrous figure, Prairie reworks the narrative and represents the victims into empowered, supernatural beings with the capacity to retaliate. The inmates' imaginations are presented as the only means at their disposal that is not subject to Hap's control. For instance, on Prairie's first night in captivity, Homer reassures her: "You'll find your freedom in sleep, in your dreams. It's how we stay sane" ("New Colossus"). This concept is also evoked via the premise of other dimensions, that Prairie conjures 'new worlds' where alternate versions of events take place. Prairie says that "there are all these dimensions, worlds, alternate realities [...] The NDEs were like a way to travel through them, but temporarily" ("Forking Paths"). Prairie's use of the word 'temporarily' suggests interdimensional travel while flatlining to be fantasies of the inmates that provide brief escapism during Hap's abuse. Prairie travels to a dimension located on the rings of Saturn, where a woman, Khatun (Hiam Abbass), asks if Prairie will remain in this realm or return to the original world with the knowledge of one of the Movements. That each of the inmates travel to a different universe further evokes this idea; Homer's alternate world appears like an institution and Scott's is described as a filmset. However, regardless of whether interdimensional travel is real or fabricated, Prairie asserts these probable fantasies to be a means of liberation for the captives: "We *wanted choices*, chances [...] A new life in a new world. *To us that was freedom*" ("Forking Paths," emphasis mine). Escapist fantasies are therefore therapeutic for Prairie and the other inmates. Further pointing to themes of victimhood and guilt, this emphasis on imagination can also be read along the lines of a Cartesian split between mind and body, one which emphasises the former over the latter. According to Suzannah Weiss, sexual abuse victims sometimes feel unclean and shameful despite having been subject to a force beyond their control and want to escape their bodies, that "many survivors feel as if their bodies have betrayed them for responding to unwelcome stimulation" (n.p.).

The group's quest to uncover all of the Movements to "allow [them] to travel to a dimension permanently" serves a similar therapeutic function, whereby the inmates retreat into fantasy as a means of regaining agency ("Forking Paths"). Prairie imagines Hap informing his colleague that he "can't help feeling outside of it all" when his inmates practice the Movements ("Forking Paths"). This type of recovery is especially significant in relation to marginalised trauma, particularly women. While Prairie eventually enlists male students to help her rescue Hap's remaining inmates, and a number of these inmates are also male, it is Prairie who orchestrates and leads the group's mission to acquire the Movements. As noted, Marling aimed to depict a female character taking agency over her recovery. This approach is referred to when a journalist advises Prairie to document her experiences, describing it as healing and empowering: "The process can sometimes help people to heal. Storytelling is cleansing. But I also want to make sure you control the narrative. That you profit from it" ("Champion"). *The OA* also critiques traditional, graphic depictions of women's trauma and sexual violence. Having returned home, a woman approaches Prairie and muses: "you're so inspirational, being beaten and raped like that," after which Prairie's mother demands to know if Prairie was "abused, beaten, hurt," despite believing she already knows this to be true ("Empire of Light"). Such responses arguably act as a commentary on the type of stories the public demands from female trauma survivors, specifically how audiences crave conventionally violent trauma narratives with almost pornographic details of the survivor's suffering.

Prairie's listeners, the 'new five,' likewise consciously choose to believe her narrative as a means to heal the trauma they were subjected to. The new five are largely made up of marginalised individuals. The group is diverse in terms of race, gender, sexuality, socio-economic status, and age. Steve Winchell (Patrick Gibson) is a bully whose parents plan to send to military school; Buck Vu (Ian Alexander) is a trans-man of American-Asian descent whose father refuses to acknowledge his gender; Alfonso 'French' Sosa (Brandon Perea) is a Filipino-American who cares for his siblings in place of his alcoholic mother; Jesse Mills (Brendan Meyer) is essentially orphaned; and the boys' teacher, Betty Broderick-Allen (Phyllis Smith), is an older woman whose brother has died. Indeed, when the school principal observes the group, he comments: "I can't imagine what the five of you have in common" ("Paradise").

The group are continually torn between doubt and a desire to believe Prairie's implausible yet uplifting narrative in a manner that is prime for a sceptical scriptotherapeutic reading. The viewer is presented with two different versions of narrative events as the new five encounter what they consider conflicting evidence that Prairie is lying and telling the truth. They appear to share the perspectives of Hap's captives and supernaturally experience their traumas, such as Buck witnessing a car accident that parallels Rachel's NDE. Such moments suggest that the new five are projecting their own interpretations onto Prairie's narrative as it plays out for the viewer, the flashback scenes being a combination of Prairie's memories and what the new five are imagining as they listen. The new five appear to similarly rework Prairie's narrative in their imaginations. When beginning the narrative, Prairie says "imagine everything I tell you as if you're there yourself [...] As if you are me" ("Homecoming"). Peter Debruge remarks, "the narrative is constantly evolving before our eyes,

it's almost impossible to get a grasp on what it is we're watching [...] Are the flashbacks we see real, or do they represent [Prairie's] listeners' vivid imaginations?" (n.p.). Certainly, unusual details in Prairie's story imply a degree of interpretation, such as Prairie's eye colour being brown rather than blue in certain flashback scenes and Hap's archaic-looking technology. The latter is possibly Betty visualising a type of 'mad scientist's' equipment akin to 1970s SF that she grew up watching. At the same time, the flashbacks can be interpreted as Prairie reworking into her story the incidents that occur to the new five. Prairie may have fabricated Hap's other captives, basing them on the new five. French cannot find evidence of Homer's existence online, while his subsequent 'transformation' into Homer when he looks in the mirror can be read as French suspecting that Prairie based Homer on him. Just before his reflection morphs into that of Homer, French examines the cut on his forehead, which is similar to that of Hap. This lucidity aligns with the scriptotheripical dual narrative form, as the narrative not only shifts between verifying and discrediting Prairie's narrative, but also between the different characters' perspectives as they too rework a trauma narrative in their imagination. Moreover, French discovers books beneath Prairie's bed that prompts the group and viewer to question the veracity of her story, as this then appears to be based on the contents of the book. Here, Prairie's FBI psychiatrist Elias Rahim (Riz Ahmed) informs French that Prairie's story is untrue. Yet, there are simultaneous suggestions that Elias planted these books, possibly under the instruction of Hap to discredit Prairie and keep Hap from prison.

However, reading these scenes in terms of sceptical scriptotherapy, the legitimacy of the narrative is ultimately irrelevant as it grants the group escapism from trauma. As with Hap's captives, Prairie's story gives the traumatised new five a sense of agency as choosing to believe and rework it to incorporate their own interpretations is amongst the only aspect of their lives over which they have control and transforms them into empowered beings, whether literally or psychologically. Marling asserts, "if you're going to have faith in something, you have to have it in the face of incredible doubt" but "nobody can take your [faith] away" (Birnbaum, n.p.). In the season finale, the group performs the Movements at their school when a shooter breaks into the cafeteria. Beforehand, the group appear in a more stable, mentally healthy condition. Prairie, too, transitions from an anxious, somewhat anti-social individual who refuses to be touched, to a more outgoing person unafraid of human contact. Marling says that "the literal truth" and details of Prairie's story "matter less" than the fact that telling it helped Prairie and the group to deal with their respective traumas (Birnbaum, n.p.). For instance, when presented with apparent evidence that Prairie is lying via the books, Buck grasps the study on angels and says "I'm keeping this one" ("Invisible Self"). The group's passionate performance of the Movements is also an apt metaphor for this approach to trauma recovery, visually establishing the concept of sceptical scriptotherapy – of rewriting traumatic events beyond individuals' control, in this instance gun violence – into empowering supernatural stories.

As to whether the Movements magically defeated the assailant or distracted him long enough for a school staff member to tackle him is dependent upon whether the viewer interprets Prairie's narrative as true or false. This lucidity likewise has unique implications for the viewer's engagement with the trauma narrative. Similar to *The OA's* characters, the viewer is presented with an overtly escapist narrative whereby they too can gain temporary comfort by consciously

suspending disbelief and deciding the more positive, supernatural interpretation of events to be canon. Indeed, Marling confirms that storytelling rather than testimony as a means of healing is a central theme of the series and a comforting notion to instil in the viewer: “We need storytellers now more than ever [...] to find a light [...] when things get [...] overwhelming [...]” (Bonner n.p.). For instance, Prairie is shot and taken to hospital, but it is unclear if the new five have transported her to another dimension. The final scene shows Prairie waking in a white room calling for Homer, which can be taken as either a hospital or Homer’s NDE location. Further, the cafeteria dance scene is obviously outlandish, but *The OA* appears to encourage viewers to buy into it for the purposes of escapism. While the scene runs the risk of being humorous, its serious tone, poignant music, and the actors’ earnest portrayal of the new five’s belief in Prairie’s narrative all appear part of an attempt to garner an emotional reaction and investment from viewers. Thus, my specific sceptical scriptotherapeutic approach demonstrates a new way to read such narratives which is vital because stories, such as *The OA*, are not just about representing trauma in nuanced ways but also allowing the audience to visualise and engage with their own traumatic experience.

New Trauma Metaphors

In addition to a sceptical scriptotherapeutic approach, I argue that the Movements provide new fantastical metaphors for representing marginalised trauma specifically. The Movements enable the group to telepathically share traumas, evident in the new five taking on the perspectives of Hap’s captives, the possibility that Prairie and the new five’s consciousnesses are blending as she tells her story, and French’s transformation into Homer. The group’s abilities of interconnectivity not only reflects testimony as a means of healing but also relate to engaging with trauma in a secondary capacity, including communal healing, secondary trauma, and transmission. In particular, the Movements evoke contemporary interpretations of these concepts in relation to marginalised trauma and the Internet.

For instance, testimony, the act of exploring narratives through writing, has strong links with communal healing, as testimony and narrating traumatic experiences implies a listener or reader, while communal healing likewise involves sharing a trauma narrative with others. In addition to testimony, Herman says that recovery is possible “within the context of relationships” (133). Analogously, when asked by Steve: “[h]ow did you survive so long” in captivity, Prairie refers to the support she received from the original group: “I survived because I wasn’t alone” (“Empire of Light”). Marling notes that Prairie’s story not only healed Prairie and the group via storytelling but also “end[ed] up stitching a community and a sense of tribe where there wasn’t one before” (Leon n.p). The Movements reflect newer methods of this type of healing, the act of not only narrating trauma but sharing it amongst others. How Prairie recruits the new five to save Hap’s captives, to “help people that [they] will never meet” across vast distances, can be read in terms of the therapeutic re-enactment of traumatic events related to sharing and reading about trauma in online forums amongst a diverse range of fellow survivors (“Homecoming”). This mode of recovery is significant because the Internet is a platform that can enable a range of individual voices to be heard, in contrast to conventional trauma theory and fiction in which the marginalised are often overlooked. While this platform still has its

own inbuilt biases and barriers – such as who decides what we see on social media platforms, who gets to speak freely on the Internet, and who can access it – the Internet does in some ways level the field and break down barriers to the presentation and reception of narratives.³ That the new five are diverse but perform the same Movements further reflects this type of healing, as does the lucidity of the narrative as it shifts between the diverse characters' perspectives. According to Martin Tanis, the ease of access to a large number of people, unrestricted by time, place or barriers, provides a sense of "universality and communality in online groups" (148). Despite the fact that members of online communities differ in dimensions including race, gender, sexuality, and class, they possess the same mental or physical condition, or have gone through similar traumatic experiences (Tanis 147). The anonymity that the Internet affords increases the perceived similarity amongst members by erasing cues that may signal individual differences and focusing solely on the issues of the members, thereby drawing increased attention to what all members of the group share, which in turn generates feelings of belonging and social identification.

Further, the new five's powers parallel secondary trauma, which can result from testimony, as secondary trauma is when an individual is traumatised from listening to, reading about, or learning of another's experience. Dominick LaCapra describes secondary trauma as the listener, reader, or viewer appropriating the victim's experience, "to confuse self and other, and collapse all distinctions" between them (21). This is similar to how the group's identities and consciousness are blended and sometimes confused in *The OA* and is evoked in how the new five experience the past traumas of Prairie and her captives; Prairie likewise takes on the new five's trauma when she takes the bullet in the cafeteria. The series references secondary trauma when Prairie's therapist informs French that the group is experiencing this having listened to Prairie's story: "Second-hand trauma is when you take somebody else's pain, so they can survive" ("Invisible Self"). The characters' shared consciousness evokes how individuals may experience secondary trauma having read about others' experiences online. Conversely, Claire Diaz-Ortiz says that engaging with social media builds empathy in individuals because "we are more informed about each other's struggles" (n.p.). Through social media different groups of people are becoming more aware and supportive of the specific issues faced by various marginalised groups. Emily VanDerWerff likewise notes, "I can't know what it's like to be a wrongly imprisoned Korean woman, but if she has access to Twitter, I can read about her travails and get a sort of second-hand feel for what it's like to be in her situation" (n.p.).⁴

It is important to note that the Internet also has the capacity to elide empathy when people do not think of the human writing the content, and that there is an additional danger of social media bubbles whereby one surrounds themselves with like-minded people and do not come into contact with different views. However, *The OA*'s representation of trauma aligns with the former, more positive view of the Internet relating to marginalised individuals. The Wachowski's *Sense8* (2015-2018) has garnered similar readings, with VanDer Werff also calling *Sense8*'s perspective "hopelessly naïve" (n.p.). The diverse new five not only share the trauma of Hap's captives as they learn the Movements, then, but the comradery of Prairie's mission allows the group to grow closer. Each of them eventually attempts to solve the problems of their fellow members. Marling says of the Movements that she aimed to "create a language of movement" for inarticulable traumas, those

that are difficult to talk about, “a profound ritual and a language for communicating” (Leon, n.p.). As noted, similar to the employment of the supernatural, transmission often has the effect of silencing trauma victims, particularly marginalised individuals. The diverse new five gain the abilities that enable them to more easily communicate their traumas to one another, the series reworking another prominent trauma concept to explore rather than repress the ostensibly ‘taboo’ experiences of the marginalised such as: for example: Prairie’s abuse; Buck’s transition; and Betty’s feelings of invisibility as an older woman. In addition to *The OA*’s unique depiction of testimony, then, the Movements evoke related concepts of engaging with trauma in a secondary capacity which are relevant to marginalised trauma. To conclude, this article demonstrated how *The OA* employs the supernatural to explore the trauma of marginalised groups, through specific fantastical metaphors and sceptical scriptotherapy. Ultimately, sceptical scriptotherapy provides a new feminist framework for examining trauma in recent popular culture and representations of marginalised groups, contributes to wider feminist trauma theory on active memory and recovery, and offers a critical challenge to dominant trauma concepts regarding testimony and healing.

NOTES

1. This is due to a number of factors, including: the increasing demand for diverse representation in contemporary popular culture and its production; the more immediate feedback on popular texts enabled by social media; and the increased creative freedom enabled by media-service providers in comparison to more traditional networks.
2. There are a number of further contemporary American popular texts that can be read in terms of sceptical scriptotherapy. These include Marling and Batmanglij’s film *Sound of My Voice* (2012), the protagonist of which can be interpreted either as a time traveller or a traumatised con artist attempting to gain custody of her daughter. Sceptical scriptotherapy can also be found in Jordan Peele’s *Us* (2019) and Sam Esmail’s *Mr Robot* (2015-2019), in which American-ethnic protagonists take on new identities and displace their traumatic experiences to more palatable, supernatural alternatives.
3. For example, topics such as intersectional feminism, what Kimberle Crenshaw describes as “a prism for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other,” such as the distinct forms of oppression faced by women of colour and trans people, are frequently omitted from trauma criticism but are explored in depth online (n.p.).
4. Also relevant is the concept of disaster or ‘doom scrolling’ and the impact this has upon second-hand trauma. The flow of negative content may cause people to believe that they must act as a witness and cannot look away.

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BIONOTE

Sean Travers has a PhD in trauma in late twentieth- and twenty-first century American popular culture. She graduated from University College Cork (UCC), Ireland, in June 2020. Her research interests include: trauma, popular culture, American fiction and culture, and postmodernism. Sean Travers has a previous publication in the *Irish Journal of American Studies*, and two forthcoming publications in *The Journal of Popular Culture* and the *Popular Culture Studies Journal* (2022).