

"One thing can look like another" The Aesthetics and Performance of Trauma in Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees*

Michelle Coupal

Volume 38, numéro 1, 2013

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl38_1art09

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (imprimé)

1718-7850 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Coupal, M. (2013). "One thing can look like another": The Aesthetics and Performance of Trauma in Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees*. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 38(1), 170–189.

“One thing can look like another”: The Aesthetics and Performance of Trauma in Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Fall on Your Knees*

MICHELLE COUPAL

ANN-MARIE MACDONALD’S *Fall on Your Knees* has attracted considerable scholarly attention, in part, because of its gothic conventions and the renewed interest in understanding Canadian colonial history through the lens of the postcolonial gothic, and, in part, because of its foregrounding of what is implicit in Canada’s gothic colonial past as it intersects with the postcolonial present: the rejoining of trauma and memory.¹ While trauma and memory in Canadian fiction are frequently taken up by scholars in the context of broader literary discourses, there is less work on the ways in which Canadian novels specifically add to theorizations of trauma. I want to posit through MacDonald’s *Fall on Your Knees* that fiction can contribute to how trauma is theorized, that is, as a real yet profoundly imaginative act that is often represented through magic-realist images which connect crisis to representation.² My reading of the novel will argue that although the novel engages with gothic conventions and tropes, trauma finds its expression through magic realism — re-presented versions of the trauma through aestheticized images and performances which move through both visual and musical forms. This article poses the questions: What is at stake in understanding trauma as an essentially aestheticized and performative experience? And how can we think about what trauma does to genre through MacDonald’s novel?

Genre issues have been at the heart of a number of scholarly articles on *Fall on Your Knees*. Critics have questioned whether the novel conforms more to magic realism or to the Gothic. Joel Baetz, for example, argues that *Fall on Your Knees* is “first and foremost a ghost story” (62). His analysis employs Freud’s conception of the uncanny to examine “the ways in which MacDonald draws on the uncanny to structure and pluralize time and history” as he explores “the way in which she gives this

temporal plurality spatial dimensions” by way of the various hauntings in the novel (63). Atef Laouyene argues that the novel “employs gothic tropes in such a way as to negotiate a process of mnemonic narrative mourning” (128). Through Freudian psychoanalysis and trauma theory, Laouyene suggests “that MacDonald’s postcolonial narrativization of gothicism not only re-focalizes the perception of Canada’s haunting/haunted history of racial formation but also, and more importantly, suggests ways of working through the several personal traumas that are dynamically implicated in this history” (129).

For Jennifer Andrews, however, the novel shares more resonances with magic realism than with the Gothic. She concedes that at “first glance, *Fall On Your Knees* could be mistaken for a Gothic novel” (7). She acknowledges that the novel “includes traces” of “Gothic conventions and tropes,” yet she suggests that MacDonald “places them within a magic-realist framework, a strategy that foregrounds the tensions between the Old and New Worlds and celebrates the mysterious aspects of this Cape Breton community” (8). Following the work of Alejo Carpentier, Andrews asserts that central to magic realism is the idea that “the marvellous or magical aspects of life are an integral part of the lived reality” (2). She contends, moreover, that “in a Latin American context, magic realism demonstrates that the strange is, in fact, commonplace and that the unreal constitutes a significant part of reality” (3-4).

I would like to add to Andrews’s suggestion that MacDonald’s novel “challenges the established definitions” of magic realism by arguing that the heart of this challenge to genre lies in the way trauma puts pressure on representation (1). In my reading of the novel, as the experience of trauma confronts the limits of both representation and understanding, magic realist techniques are employed to represent the traumatic moment as at once real and imaginatively reconstituted. Trauma requires flexible generic forms, such as magic realism, to blur distinctions between the real and the imagined. My reading thus offers an alternative understanding to the novel’s generic conventions, which I argue are manipulated precisely in the service of its traumatic re-presentations. MacDonald’s novel suggests that trauma invites the imagination into its articulation in the collusion between the real and the unreal.

Eugene L. Arva posits the term “traumatic imagination” to describe the connection between trauma and magic realism within which writers

and readers “act out and/or work through trauma by means of magical realist images” (5). For Arva, the “traumatic imagination is responsible for the production of many literary texts that struggle to *re-present* the unrepresentable and, ultimately, to reconstruct events whose forgetting has proved just as unbearable as their remembering” (5). He further argues that the traumatic imagination is “the essential consciousness of survival to which the psyche resorts when confronted with the impossibility of remembering limit events and with the resulting compulsive repetition of images of violence and loss” (5). I want to extend Arva’s theorization of the traumatic imagination as a necessary part of psychic registry and recovery in magic realist fiction to the imagistic and performative representations of trauma in *Fall on Your Knees*. What I would like to add to the already robust scholarship on this novel is what I see as MacDonald’s chief insight into trauma and memory: that trauma is registered and remembered not through language but primarily through the senses as mediated representations of the event, that is, as aestheticized and often highly imaginative recreations of the traumatic moment. Roger Luckhurst observes:

One of the central ways in which contemporary trauma has been conceived is around the symptom of the intrusive or recurrent image, the unbidden flashback that abolishes time and reimmerses you in the visual field of the inaugurating traumatic instant. There is a profound disjunction implied: the visual intrusion recurs because linguistic and memorial machineries completely fail to integrate or process the traumatic image. Perhaps, then, it is in the image that the psychic registration of trauma truly resides. (147)

This article will focus first on key scenes in which *Fall on Your Knees* presents memories as visual images by employing film, painting, and pictures to arbitrate traumatic encounters. As Candida Rifkind suggests, “As the characters struggle to represent to themselves mental pictures of traumatic experiences, the visual comes to mediate between the subject’s history and its representation in the present” (31). My second focus is music and performance, which, like images, are similarly advanced as languages of trauma through which characters register but never completely apprehend traumatic events. The novel seems to suggest that trauma always needs to be mediated through something, that it can never be experienced directly. In the moment of trauma, then, the novel’s characters aestheticize the event, often literally as art, usually a

painting, and then later recall the trauma in terms of abandoned art or dormant paintings, partitioned off in their minds as too difficult to confront directly. The word *aesthetic* is derived from an aestheticization of the senses, a representation of sensual experience, and simultaneously an experience *of* the senses. As representation *and* experience, the aesthetic can both express the traumatic experience and re-materialize it all over again as a means of achieving psychological distance from it. What is at stake in this conception of trauma *as* representation is that trauma is always already a sensory composition, a re-presentation of the bewildering and horrific event, a restoration that can never achieve its pristine original state. Because of this — and as Frances learns in the novel — one thing looks like another, which suggests that while the traumatic encounter is a real event, it is experienced as less than real, more as a coded portraiture that returns and haunts the subject who encodes but cannot always access the trauma. The effect of this aesthetic distance, if you will, is to throw truth and knowability into constant crisis for not only the novel's characters, but also its readers.

Fall on Your Knees is set in Cape Breton and New York City, primarily during the first decades of the twentieth century. In its exploration of race, gender, and sexuality, the novel tells the traumatic story of the Piper family: James, the Scottish/Irish patriarch; his young wife, Materia, a Lebanese, first-generation immigrant to Canada; and their daughters, Kathleen, Mercedes, Frances, and Lily — the youngest “daughter,” who eventually learns that her real parents are James and her “sister,” Kathleen. The novel's opening frames questions of trauma, memory, and aesthetic perception through a series of “pictures” which invite readers to apprehend the Piper family beyond language — to *see* their representations in sensory terms. The narrative thus opens as a “Silent Picture,” inaugurating its own haunting with the first line: “They're all dead now” (1). The narrator offers readers “a picture of the town where they lived. New Waterford” (1). Readers are invited to look down at this picture, as if “from the height of a church steeple,” ironically suggesting a moral high ground or perhaps a similarly ironic echoing of the long Canadian literary tradition of the poet on a height of land.³ Either way, the narrative seems to ask readers to look down upon it, to take a bird's eye view and visually frame it. Rather than a picturesque, bucolic landscape, the narrative gaze moves from the mining town — “Company houses. Company town” — over the “sighing”

sea, to a private, domestic scene of trauma: “a *picture* of their house as it was then” (1; emphasis added). Readers are asked to imagine the house without being given any indication of the impending traumas within its walls, which I understand as an early suggestion of the essential unreadability of the traumatic events of this novel.

MacDonald’s strategy of arbitrating traumatic encounters through aesthetic representations is on display, albeit cryptically, as the narrator continues to offer up a series of what are called “pictures,” images that represent facts to the reader without revealing hidden truths. There is a “picture” of James asleep in the green wingback chair (2), which seems innocent enough, but further on in the novel, the reader learns that it is in this chair that James sexually abuses his daughter, Frances (375). There is a “picture” of Ambrose’s empty crib. What the reader is not told is that Frances, in trying to baptize Ambrose, inadvertently drowns him in the creek. Following a “picture” of Mercedes holding her rosary, finger on lips saying, “Shshsh,” as if to say, “these pictures are a secret,” comes a “moving picture” that “is also a silent one” (3) of Frances at the creek. The shift from still to moving pictures is marked by a series of questions that suggest the narrator/viewer’s lack of comprehension of the scene of Frances at the creek: “What’s she doing in the middle of the creek, in the middle of the night? And what’s she hugging to her chest?” (3). The creek is a paradigmatic scene of trauma for Frances, but the reader is only given fragments of the horrors she has just witnessed and experienced. The central traumas of the novel are thus all represented as a series of pictures that the reader cannot possibly decipher until the novel’s conclusion. These pictures function as aestheticized traumatic memories that cannot be encoded into language. They represent facts but not the truth of what happened. As such, and as I argue, these pictures frame the novel’s concern with how trauma is imagined and recreated by its characters.

The pictures, thus, also work to gesture toward traumas not yet revealed. Joel Baetz argues that the pictures in *Fall on Your Knees* are uncanny ones that have been “previously repressed or turned away and that, at a later moment, [return] to full view” (71). I want to suggest that these pictures also mimic the workings of traumatic memory, both through their sensory recordings of events and in the narrative structure, which is based on the principle of belatedness whereby knowledge of the facts of the traumas are withheld.⁴ Caruth contends that belatedness is

a grounding principle of traumatic experience: "Traumatic experience . . . suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness" (91-92). The shards of traumatic memory that are presented in this first creek scene cannot be understood by the reader or narrator, as they require translation from the language of trauma to narrative. The "moving picture" asks the reader to "imagine you can hear the creek trickling. Like a girl telling a secret in a language so much like our own" (3). The reader is asked to respond through the sense of hearing to the language of trauma, which is "a secret language so much like our own," but importantly not the same as our own. Yet traumatic language, in its own way, is a more faithful representation of the trauma itself. The narrator suggests that if Frances were asked what she was doing at the creek, "even if she were to answer, we wouldn't know what she was saying, because, although this is a moving picture, it is also a silent one" (3). Wordless, the traumatic memory retains its force without yielding its knowledge. The "Silent Pictures" record submerged memories that will surface throughout the course of the narrative.

This three-page opening chapter ends, importantly, with a reference to the only surviving picture of Kathleen. The picture is a significant and recurring marker of an array of traumatic memories central to the novel. A short chapter entitled "Moving Picture" recounts a photographer's many attempts to secure a picture of his moving target, Kathleen, whose uncontrollable laughter, sparked by her lively exchanges with her father, James, precludes a good still shot. The final picture that he manages to take memorializes the idyllic relationship between James and his daughter before the rape, while at the same time signalling the impending sexual abuse and its tragic consequences: pregnancy and the butchering of Kathleen by Materia as she performs an impromptu Caesarean section ostensibly to save the twins, who are, of course, a product of that rape: "James sneaks up behind the camera and pulls a cross-eyed face at Kathleen. She flops forward, hands on her knees, laughing into the camera, 'Daddy!' — while at the same instant Materia appears in the window behind her and waves — *snap*. Through the lens, Materia's hand fractures into light, framing Kathleen's blur of hair. Materia must be holding something shiny" (80).

The reader learns on the next page that Materia is holding scissors.

The “*snap*” of the camera then echoes the snap of the scissors which Materia uses to cut up her kidneys for her steak and kidney pies and which she ultimately uses to cut up Kathleen. The scissors also represent Materia’s suicide following Kathleen’s death, and they do so, again, through the senses. As Materia literally roasts in the oven, Frances and Mercedes smell kidneys and wonder without irony why Materia is baking in the middle of the night (168). This picture is indeed a moving one, and not simply because Kathleen cannot stay still. Like trauma, the deployment of the pictures is symptomatic of a reality that cannot be captured. The traumas that the picture signifies are not static but shifting, as layers of memory are added to the narrative in a succession of traumatic flashbacks. Encoded in the novel’s opening chapter, this picture visually encapsulates the traumas yet to come without revealing them. In its constitutive ambiguity, the picture functions as traumatic memory itself, intruding upon the characters and narrative action throughout the novel. In an echoing of this understanding, and of Kathleen’s bad case of the giggles, the traumatized Frances bursts into hysterical laughter at Materia’s funeral, a laughter which James and Mercedes mistake for crying:

Frances learns something in this moment that will allow her to survive and function for the rest of her life. She finds out that *one thing can look like another*. That the facts of a situation don’t necessarily indicate anything about the truth of a situation. In this moment, fact and truth become separated and commence to wander like twins in a fairy-tale, waiting to be reunited by that special someone who possesses the secret of telling them apart. (142; emphasis added)

What Frances learns is what trauma teaches: fact and truth are not interchangeable terms; one thing can look like another, and, moreover, one thing *does* look like another as traumatic memories are visually mediated and represented in the borderland of fact and fiction.

The following chapter, “Cave Paintings,” extends the visual nature of the traumatic encounter to include its moment of registry. Upon pounding his way through the attic door to the scene of Kathleen’s death, James perceives it as a painting: “When the attic door finally gave way, James saw this silent portrait: *Death and the Young Mother*. It’s an overdone, tasteless, melodramatic painting. A folk painting from a hot culture. Naive. Grotesque. Authentic” (143).⁵ James achieves dis-

tance from the scene of horror by encoding and aestheticizing it as art. James's racism, which sparked his surprise trip to New York to collect Kathleen, and provoked his rape of her, contributes to the rendering of this portrait as primitive; however, the portrait as a "cave painting" gestures toward something more primal and originary, as it connotes a pre-language of schematic drawing. Accordingly, the scene is "not a gauzy, Victorian death scene. No fetishized feminine pallor, no agnostic slant of celestial light, no decorously distraught husband. The portrait is in livid colour" (143). The "overdone" and "melodramatic" character of the portrait corresponds to the excess inherent in trauma: by definition, trauma overwhelms with its extravagant horror. As James looks upon Kathleen's "ravaged" body, the sheets "black with blood," "the Grandmother" — *Materia* — "looks straight out from the picture at the viewer," James (143). James as "viewer" distances himself from the traumatic encounter and is more like a museum spectator than a participant. Bessel A. van der Kolk, psychiatry professor and clinician whose work focuses on trauma and post-traumatic stress, observes that traumatic encounters are usually apprehended as sensory representations of the event:

Numerous commentators on trauma . . . keep noting that trauma is organized in memory on a perceptual level. . . . Clinical experience and our reading of a century of observations by clinicians dealing with a variety of traumatized populations have led us to postulate that memories of the trauma tend, at least initially, to be experienced as fragments of sensory components of the event: as visual images; olfactory, auditory, or kinaesthetic sensations; or intense waves of feelings that patients usually claim to be representations of elements of the original traumatic event. (287)

While perhaps less fragmentary than van der Kolk's clinical understanding of the traumatic encounter, James's graphic portraiture here reveals trauma to be not so much a crisis of representation beyond and outside of language as it is crisis *as* representation.

Cave paintings also recall Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" in book 7 of *Republic*, where the cave is a kind of cinema in which prisoners, chained and able to look only to the cave's back wall, see reflections of the truth as dark shadows from the outside world, where the blinding firelight of Truth shines. In Plato's description, once a prisoner is unchained and free from the shadows, he walks out of the cave into the light — which

is blinding as well as illuminating. Being accustomed to dark shadows, a prisoner needs time to interpret the light. In both darkness and light, Plato suggests, the senses can be tricked. In MacDonald's reworking of this image, traumatic memory is shown to reveal its truths both in livid colour and by the light of the dark, by what cannot be seen. The narrative concedes that the painting, *Death and the Young Mother*, is not a literal one, "but a moment freeze-framed by James's eye" (144). Not simply an image or a snapshot, this is an aesthetic image, a painting that is both blinding and illuminating, blurring fact and truth. The aesthetic representation suggests that the scene is always already subject to the shaping imagination of the viewer, and that traumatic memory is always already to some extent an aesthetic process, which does not make it any less "authentic."

The narrator then asks, "What can you do with such a picture? You never want to see it again yet you can't bring yourself to burn it or slash it to dust. You have to keep it" (144). The hope chest, which lies at the foot of the bed in the attic, functions as a memory chest throughout the novel, as it does here for James. A voice in his head suggests a course of action for the picture: "*Put it in the hope chest, James,*" put the trauma aside, keep it as a picture rather than incorporate it into language and knowledge (144). The portrait lies like an heirloom in the chest, in space but outside of time: "for a second James feels as though that's what he's looking at — an old portrait that he hid in the hope chest many years ago and just stumbled upon again. This temporary confusion is a premonition; it tells him that he will never get over this sight. That it will be as fresh fourteen years from now, the colours not quite dry, just as it is today" (144). James's premonition suggests that past and present collapse in the confrontation with the intrusive traumatic image. The fresh colours signify a fresh wound even as the portrait lies dormant. Trauma, suggests Caruth, "is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (4). As the narrative makes explicit, James loses access to the "reality or truth" of the trauma he has witnessed:

James goes out of the room, but not far. His legs give way and he collapses outside the fallen door, unconscious. He doesn't hear the first cries of the babies inside. The involuntary part of his mind does, though. It is just not conveying the message. It is keeping it

on a crumpled piece of paper on the floor of its cave. It is taking a break, admiring its cave painting by the light of the dark. (144)

The traumatic memory appears to be stowed in James's unconscious as a repressed memory. James still has access to the crumpled piece of paper, but he is "taking a break," as his unconscious paradoxically admires the painting, which is to say his aestheticized traumatic memory, "by the light of the dark," or by what is revealed by what he cannot see.

The metaphor of the cave painting is extended to what the narrator refers to as the "cave mind," or the unconscious. Little Frances, who is five "going on six" (140), witnesses the same scene as James, although she does so differently:

The difference between Frances and James is that, although she sees a version of the same horrible picture, Frances is young enough still to be under the greater influence of the cave mind. It will never forget. But it steals the picture from her voluntary mind — grand theft art — and stows it, canvas side to the cave wall. It has decided, "If we are to continue functioning, we can't have this picture lying around." So Frances sees her sister and, unlike her father, will forget almost immediately, but, like her father, will not get over it. (146)

Both James and Frances create their own representation or "version" of the same traumatic scene. Unlike James, whose memory lies on the cave floor awaiting retrieval, Frances's memory is stolen — "grand theft art" — and hidden from her conscious understanding, "canvas side to the cave wall." References to art are repeatedly emphasized in this passage, foregrounding trauma as representation of the event while also asserting its capacity to slip away from the subject.

This figurative rendering of traumatic memory as a painting hanging in the mind, back side to the front so that it cannot be seen, shares the features of inaccessible, dissociated memories that can be recovered at a later time in life when the subject is psychologically able to assimilate them. Frances forgets "almost immediately," but her unconscious "cave mind" does not: "By now she has already lost her conscious grip on the events of two nights ago, when the babies were born. She has shivered them away. The cave mind has entered into a creative collaboration with the voluntary mind, and soon the two of them will cocoon memory in a spinning wealth of dreams and yarns and finger-paintings. Fact and truth, fact and truth . . ." (150-51). The weaving of fact and

truth recalls Frances's earlier epiphany that "one thing can look like another," that facts do not represent truth. The distinction between fact and truth is much more subtle than the binary one expects with traumatic memory, that is, between fact and fiction, what is real versus what is not. MacDonald's nuanced insight into traumatic memory as a tricky portraiture reveals that these memories are less about falsity or lies than they are about access to the truth, which is woven by "a spinning wealth of dreams and yarns," as Frances's traumatized imagination collaborates with the facts of the event.

Similarly, in unearthing her memory of Frances and James in the rocking chair, Mercedes, like James, represents the traumatic memory as a repressed, abandoned piece of art in her mind:

She has kept this memory on top of a pile of things at the back of her mind. Not buried. Right there where she can see it every time she passes the open door. But as long as she keeps it in the back room, she can believe that it belongs with the rest of the old junk. As long as she doesn't talk about it, it can remain overlooked by amateurs and experts alike: the gilt frame covered with dust, the painting gummed over with neglect — who would guess what a piece of work lies dormant there. (374)

Like James's crumpled piece of paper on the floor of the cave, accessible but not accessed, Mercedes's memory is available to her if she chooses to look at it. This passage — itself a beautiful representation of the workings of the unconscious and repressed memory — stages the visual and aesthetic aspects of traumatic memory. Mercedes decides to view her long-ignored painting: "It was here in the living-room. The painting from the junk pile is called *Daddy and Frances in the Rocking-Chair*. But there never was a rocking-chair, in this room or any other. Just the pale green wingback" (374). Fact and truth intersect as Mercedes continues to remember: "She's sitting on Daddy's lap, sideways, facing me. Rocking. He's rocking her. But it's not working, she's wide awake" (375). The fact is that it is not a rocking chair; the truth is that it is a rocking chair.

This recursive scene was first narrated in an earlier chapter, a subsection of which is entitled "The Rocking Chair" (167). It is the night of Kathleen's funeral. As Mercedes descends the stairs to the rocking-chair scene, she smells kidneys without understanding that she is smelling Materia in the oven. The scene of sexual molestation is similarly pre-

sented yet missed. None of the details of the sexual abuse which are fully narrated on pages 375-76 are detailed here. The clues, like the “puppy sounds” James is making, are given alternate explanations. The only real hint is when Frances tells Mercedes, “It doesn’t hurt” (168). My notes from my first reading of the novel say, “What doesn’t hurt?” Suspicious but without sufficient grounds for coming to a conclusion, I could only pass over the scene as potential foreshadowing of what was to come. To put it another way, I could only read the scene as the characters in the novel read their traumatic memories: a cave painting facing the wall, a scrap of paper that is not looked at, a dusty old painting in a junk pile — there in front of my eyes as a fact without revealing its truth. It takes another two hundred pages for the truth to be revealed. In its repetitive and belated structure, the narrative internalizes the process of traumatic experience. It furthermore attempts to represent the dynamics of traumatic experience in its recursive structure, in its reticence, and in its suggestion that there is an analogy for traumatic memory in the notion of storage and reclamation.

Like pictures and paintings, music is similarly employed to provide both aesthetic distance and a visceral, sensory re-presentation of the traumas. MacDonald uses music narratively, as a mediating language of trauma that articulates childhood abuse through performance. Trauma as performance is perhaps less radical than it sounds. The traumatic imagination always already re-dramatizes the scene of trauma to make it manageable for its victim. Dina Georgis, in a sustained analysis of the workings of trauma, specifically through jazz music in the novel, argues that “because music defies discursive representation, it functions as an effective location for the unrepresentable character of traumatic history” (215). Music is representation without image or as close to leaving image behind as possible. In this sense, music avoids the crisis of representation by doing away with representation itself, although music does have affective resonances, making it perhaps more visceral in this way.

In general terms, music shapes the novel and resonates throughout its pages.⁶ One need only think of its title, a reference to the song, “Oh Holy Night,” itself the ironic title of the chapter in which Kathleen and Materia both melodramatically die. In the staging of this chapter, one can almost hear the song in the background, as Kathleen, a talented singer, is operatically butchered by her mother, who gouges a cross in her belly. More than simply thematic, however, music becomes

a guiding structural principal for the organization of the text. Indeed, as MacDonald (a playwright as well as a novelist) attests, “when I was writing this book, I conceived of it as a musical. . . . Not just because I use music in it but because the whole thing should be and is musical. I wrote it in three movements, and there are leitmotifs that recur” (Lockhart 146). The recursive nature of the text thus not only mimes the symptoms of traumatic stress; it is also a musical structure, based upon repetitions and modulations of the same theme. Moreover, whereas the text links visual art with traumatic memory, music becomes explicitly linked to traumas of childhood abuse, perhaps most interestingly, as a musical performance of traumatic experiences.

For James, the musical intersects with the visual as he listens to Mercedes play “Oh My Darlin’ Clementine” on the piano (259). When Mercedes has finished the song, James offers to fix the C sharp, which Mercedes concedes is “so annoying” (260). The song lyrically connects James to his “darlin,” Kathleen: “you are lost and gone forever” “dreadful sorry, Clementine,” and also and importantly, “How I missed my Clementine, / Till I kissed her little sister.” James then sees the photograph on the piano, discussed earlier on, of the laughing Kathleen with Materia in the background. Past and present entwine for James in what seems like a traumatic flashback:

Now is the dim past. Then was the shining present. He hears her laugh. He hears the water trickling in the creek and flash goes Materia’s waving hand. . . . You think you’re safe. Until you see a picture like that. And then you know you’ll always be a slave to the present because the present is more powerful than the past, no matter how long ago the present happened. (260)

The enmeshing of past and present suggests the immediacy of the traumatic memory, which is sparked by both visual and auditory stimuli.

The scene continues with James now fixed on his picture of the past: “The breath assaults James’s lungs and he comes out of the black and white picture back into the room of living colour” (260). As James tries to understand which of his daughters is responsible for displaying the picture of Kathleen, Frances, in her effort to deflect attention from the guilty Mercedes, provokes James with questions about Kathleen, including this one: “Was she a slut?” (261). Although the text does not reveal James’s thoughts, Frances’s question would no doubt trigger memories of

the day James found Kathleen with her lover, Rose, and his subsequent rape of Kathleen. James's response is to take Frances out to the shed for a beating. This scene of abuse is articulated entirely in musical terms, as a sustained performance of traumatic violence:

In the shed the performance has begun. The upbeat grabs her neck till she's on point, the downbeat thrusts her back against the wall, two eighth-notes of head on wood, knuckles clatter incidentally. In the half-note rest he lights up her pale face with the blue wicks of his eyes, and the lyrics kick in *con spirito*. . . . The next two bars are like the first, then we're into the second movement, swing your partner from the wall into the workbench, which catches her in the small of the back, grace-note into stumble because she bounces, being young. *Staccato* across the face, then she expands her percussive range and becomes a silent tambourine. . . . We've gone all stately; it's whole notes from here on in. She flies against another wall and he follows her trajectory, taking his time now because we're working up to the finale. One more clash of timbers and tissues and it's finally opera, "I'll cut the tongue right out of your head." She sticks her tongue out at him and tastes blood. Cue finale to the gut. Frances folds over till she's on the floor. Modern dancer. (262-63)

As a language of trauma, music is used to mediate the violence without diminishing its force through a performance that is almost a therapeutic parody of violence, while it also contains and frames the incident. In a way, Frances loses her humanity in the attack and becomes a "silent tambourine," a dissociated instrument; however, she is not just a silent victim. She becomes an instrument through whom the violent "utterances" of her abuser are expressed. By articulating the beating of Frances as a performance with an operatic finale, MacDonald accentuates the theatricality of traumatic experience as if to suggest that trauma always plays itself out dramatically, here backed up by a full symphony of sound. This gestures toward trauma's excess in that it is always, by definition, too much to comprehend and beyond straightforward representation; yet the musical performance *is* a representation. Like the visual apprehensions of trauma expressed through the paintings, *Death and the Young Mother* and *Daddy and Frances in the Rocking-Chair*, the beating of Frances similarly foregrounds itself as a representation or performance of the event rather than the event itself, which can only

ever be a reconstruction of that which is too horrific to comprehend. At the end, Frances collapses not straightforwardly as a terribly abused child; she falls into a tableau at the conclusion of the show: a “modern dancer” that stands in for Frances’s traumatized body.

Music and dance become Frances’s creative languages to articulate traumas that she cannot otherwise speak aloud. While the narrative withholds its truths about James’s incestuous abuse of Frances until near its conclusion, Frances nonetheless cries out, most radically in her provocative song and dance performances at Jameel’s speakeasy. Frances’s body becomes an unsettling site of ambiguity in the performance of her “Baby Burlesque.” In a mockery of what it means to be a good girl, Frances wears her Girl Guide uniform to the makeshift bar whereupon she attempts to entertain the men with “a solo second-hand foxtrot” and her “spindly kewpie-doll voice” with little success (288). She quickly downs three drinks and “cranks the player-piano. The mechanical thumping of a hobnail army renders ‘Coming thru’ the Rye’ and Frances wriggles out of her uniform and down to her skivvies via the highland fling cum cancan. They start watching” (288). The stripping of the Girl Guide uniform troubles notions of childhood innocence as Frances acts out sexually beyond her years. In fact, her rebellious striptease is one of the main clues offered by the text that Frances was sexually abused as a child. Readers are not yet privy to the fact that James has been molesting her since the night of Kathleen’s funeral. Like a traumatized subject, the reader can only understand what Frances is performing belatedly; and like traumatic memory itself, Frances’s song and dance routines re-enact her traumatic wounds while obfuscating the full truth of that abuse. As Frances begins to prostitute herself to Jameel’s customers for extra money, her performances at “the speak” become more and more elaborate. The choice of the burlesque is an interesting one. The style is flamboyant, exaggerated, theatrical, and parodic. Indeed, she seems to parody her own sexual abuse for the amusement of the crowd:

Frances is a bizarre delta diva one night, warbling in her thin soprano, “Moonshine Blues” and “Shave ’em Dry.” Declaring, an octave above the norm, “I can strut my pudding, spread my grease with ease, ’cause I know my onions, that’s why I always please.” The following Saturday will see her stripped from the waist up, wearing James’s old horsehair war sporran as a wig, singing, “I’m Just Wild about Harry” in pidgin Arabic. She turns the freckle on her

nose to an exclamation mark with a stroke of eyeliner, rouges her cheeks, paints on a cupid's-bow mouth and dances naked behind a home-made fan of seagull feathers, "I wish I could shimmy like my sister, Kate." (292)

Frances's burlesque performance brings to the fore the spectacle of trauma in which the victim re-engages to remember and relive the experience indirectly yet theatrically. Frances seems to be replaying, night after night, masked versions of her traumas in what Caruth calls trauma's "repetitive seeing" (92). Frances has not yet remembered her childhood traumas, but as Caruth argues, "The repetitions of the traumatic event — which remain unavailable to consciousness but intrude repeatedly on sight — thus suggest a larger relation to the event that extends beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known" (92). Frances's musical versions of her abuse express and expose what she cannot otherwise articulate: "just in case any one's in danger of getting more horny than amused, there's always a surprise to wilt the wicked and stimulate the unsuspecting. For example, she may strip down to a diaper, then stick her thumb in her mouth. 'Yes my heart belongs to Daddy, so I simply couldn't be ba-ad. . .'" (293). Frances here accentuates the absurdity of child sexual abuse. She seems to be saying that she could just as easily be a sexualized baby as a sexualized child. She seems to ask if there is any material difference. This example shows, however, that there is, because the baby costume prevents titillation whereas the child dressed as a Girl Guide seems able to produce it. Candida Rifkind similarly observes that Frances's burlesque "blurs distinctions between adult and childhood sexuality to both titillate and deflate her admirers" (40). Rifkind further argues that the body Frances "exposes to the audience is a series of masks that transgress social categories and moral boundaries separating genders, nations, adult sexuality and childhood innocence, domesticity and public performance" (40). I would add to this that Frances's transgressive performances and costumes also function as masks that operate like the pictures and portraits discussed earlier, that is, as ersatz versions of traumatic memories that mediate the real traumatic event.

Indeed, memories are explicitly linked to masks in a scene following Frances's series of childhood traumas, which begins with her inadvertently drowning Ambrose in the creek following her witnessing of the dead Kathleen's ravaged body and culminates in the death of her

mother, which also marks the onset of James's sexual molestations of her. Little Frances processes memories of this terrible series of events as cloaked representations of what actually happened: "It's a good thing Mumma's gone,' Frances would say to herself, going over and over in her mind all the terrible things she couldn't quite recall — weaving the threads together into an *ingenious cloak of motley*. 'Because if Mumma were here, she would know what a bad girl I've been'" (174; emphasis added). Like many abused children, Frances internalizes the traumatic events as the fault of her own, and she does so vis-à-vis strands of memory that she shapes into an "ingenious cloak of motley." Connecting traumatic memory to the motley of a court jester or harlequin makes Frances a clown figure or, perhaps more accurately, the Fool of the novel. Like the wise Fools of Shakespeare's plays, Frances speaks truths that are not known or understood by other characters. Leo Taylor observes Frances in her Girl Guide uniform leaving the speak wearing her performance makeup and jewellery: "A lot of those men in there, and the women too who laugh along, they see her as their clown. The whore part is bad enough, but who ever heard of a whore clown?" (350). As whore clown, Frances not only amuses and even titillates the crowd; her performance is also both a traumatic return to and a scathing parody of her childhood sexual abuse. As a metaphor for the workings of traumatic memory, the cloak of motley shields Frances from memories of the night at the creek that she will not fully recover until near the novel's conclusion and with the help of James. The cloak of motley, however, has a performative function as it also dramatizes the traumas through the whore-clown burlesque performances. Rifkind argues that "Frances's burlesque dancing and prostitution reveal her apprehension of the body as a site of a reality that is always an illusion" (40). By acting as both a site (and sight) of reality and illusion *at the same time*, Frances's body performs the work of traumatic memory for the delectation of her customers.

The novel sustains its emphasis on the murky truth-status of representations of trauma through to its conclusion. The third to last chapter is called "Armistice Day," which is the day James went to New York, found Kathleen with her lover, Rose, and then raped her. That Remembrance Day is the day that James rapes Kathleen is significant. The event, ironically, has been lost to memory, except perhaps for James, and yet it is the trauma that is the source of so many of the traumas

that follow: the day becomes a memorial day for what cannot be fully remembered. Like traumatic memory, this chapter is offered belatedly at the end of the book. This latency is complicated by the fact that "Armistice Day" recalls an earlier moment in the text where Lily marches in the Armistice Day parade. Music, pageantry, and costume are connected to memory and time as the future (child of James and Kathleen, Lily) is presented in the text before the past (Kathleen). The effect is to suggest a powerful connection between and intermingling of the past, present, and future through permeable traumatic memories. Because the text is structured upon a series of traumatic memories that change as they are re-written and re-presented over time, the reader can never be sure of the reliability of the narrative. In fact, in this Remembrance Day chapter, which will ostensibly finally reveal the memory that Kathleen was indeed raped by James, truth is thrown into question from the start by its epigraph from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: "Of wicked and most cursèd things to speak I now commence. / Ye daughters and ye parents, all go, get you far from hence; / Or if ye minded be to hear my tale, believe me nought / In this behalf, nor think that such a thing was ever wrought" (548). The narrative seems to say, "remember but believe me not." To put it another way, and as the narrator concedes, "Memory is another word for story, and nothing is more unreliable" (270).

Through visual media, music, and performance, *Fall on Your Knees* offers up a series of traumatic memories as always and only representations of the original encounter, curtailed dramatizations that participate in the creation of what is known without revealing full understanding of the event. Caruth posits that in the

bewildering encounter with trauma . . . we can begin to recognize the possibility of a history that is no longer straightforwardly referential (that is, no longer based on simple models of experience and reference). Through the notion of trauma . . . we can understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not. (11)

Fall on Your Knees seems to suggest that what allows history to arise is precisely the performative and aesthetic aspects of traumatic memory.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I am grateful to Manina Jones, Joel Faflak, Elizabeth Effinger, Herb Wyile, John Ball, and the anonymous reviewers at *SCL/ÉLC* for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.

NOTES

¹ Indeed, *Fall on Your Knees* is taken up by two authors in the recent edited collection of essays on Canadian literature and the postcolonial gothic. See Cynthia Sugars and Gerry Turcotte, *Unsettled Remains: Canadian Literature and the Postcolonial Gothic* (2009). See also Andrew Smith and William Hughes, *Empire and the Gothic* (2003) and Alison Rudd, *Postcolonial Gothic Fictions from the Caribbean, Canada, Australia and New Zealand* (2010).

² This theorization through MacDonald's novel could be extended to other Canadian novels which similarly employ magic realism in their representation of trauma: Gail Anderson-Dargatz's *The Cure for Death by Lightning* (1996), Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), and Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001). One might also include Native Canadian novels such as Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998) and Robert Arthur Alexie's *Porcupines and China Dolls* (2002).

³ One thinks of Thomas Cary, Charles G.D. Roberts, and Duncan Campbell Scott, to name a few.

⁴ Baetz similarly argues that "*Fall on Your Knees* is itself an uncanny narrative, both structurally and thematically" (74).

⁵ This is likely a reference to the 1861 etching by Rodolphe Bresdin called "Death and the Maiden." The novel is also replete with musical intertexts, recalling here Franz Schubert's *Death and the Maiden* and also Chilean playwright Ariel Dorfman's 1990 *Death and the Maiden*, in which a woman is raped by her captors while Schubert's composition is played. Roman Polanski adapted the play to film in 1994.

⁶ Trish Salah, for example, analyzes the novel in terms of what she argues is its fugue structure: "If *Fall on Your Knees* is a fugue, it is uncannily so, a double fugue with counter-subject haunting subject" — by which she means trauma and desire (246).

WORKS CITED

- Andrews, Jennifer. "Rethinking the Relevance of Magic Realism for English-Canadian Literature: Reading Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall On Your Knees*." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 24.1 (1999): 1-19. Print.
- Arva, Eugene L. *The Traumatic Imagination: Histories of Violence in Magical Realist Fiction*. Amherst: Cambria, 2011. Print.
- Baetz, Joel. "Tales from the Canadian Crypt: Canadian Ghosts, the Cultural Uncanny, and the Necessity of Haunting in Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees*." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 29.2 (2004): 62-83. Print.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996. Print.

- Georgis, Dina. "Falling for Jazz: Desire, Dissonance, and Racial Collaboration." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 35.2 (2005): 215-29. *Project Muse*. Web. 31 May 2011.
- Laouyene, Atef. "Canadian Gothic and the Work of Ghosting in Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees*." *Unsettled Remains: Canadian Literature and the Postcolonial Gothic*. Ed. Cynthia Sugars and Gerry Turcotte. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2009. 125-54. Print.
- Lockhart, Melanie Lee. "'Taking Them to the Moon in a Station Wagon': An Interview with Ann-Marie MacDonald." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 35.2 (2005): 139-57. *Project Muse*. Web. 31 May 2011.
- Luckhurst, Roger. *The Trauma Question*. London: Routledge, 2008. Print.
- MacDonald, Ann-Marie. *Fall on Your Knees*. 1996. Toronto: Vintage, 1997. Print.
- Rifkind, Candida. "Screening Modernity: Cinema and Sexuality in Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall On Your Knees*." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 27.2 (2002): 29-50. Print.
- Salah, Trish. "What Memory Wants: Broken Tongue, Stranger Fugue in *Fall on Your Knees*." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 35.2 (2005): 231-49. *Project Muse*. Web. 31 May 2011.
- van der Kolk, Bessel A. "Trauma and Memory." *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*. Ed. Bessel A. van der Kolk, Alexander C. McFarlane, and Lars Weisaeth. New York: Guilford, 1996. 279-302. Print.