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"Am I not OK?"
Negotiating and Re-Defining Traumatic Experience in Emma Donoghue's *Room*

At the end of Emma Donoghue's *Room*, a novel that explores both the horror of life in captivity and the uneasy transition back into the world after escape, five-year-old Jack and his mother return to the site of their imprisonment—a garden shed Jack has only known as Room—for one last look around. Donoghue's novel gives equal attention to life during and after captivity: indeed, much of the book's tension revolves around the complexities of a young woman who attempts to parent her young son born as a result of rape—as normally as possible given the circumstances—both in captivity and following their escape and transition back into non-captive life.

For Jack, who was born and raised within the confines of Room, the return to the place he once unflinchingly considered his home (and the entirety of his world) is marked by a distinct sense of unfamiliarity. Jack observes: "We step in through Door and it's all wrong. Smaller than Room and it smells weird" (413). While Jack reflects that he "[guesses] this really was Room one time" (414), the novel ultimately ends with an ambivalent statement about both the physical space of Room as well as Jack's perspective on the events that led to Ma's imprisonment, his birth, and their eventual re-emergence into the world: "I look back one more time. It's like a crater, a hole where something happened" (414).

While it is tempting to read this final scene of Donoghue's novel along the theoretical lines that posit traumatic experience as an aporia or a site of belatedness, as a moment where Jack cannot "register the wound to [his] psyche because the ordinary mechanisms of awareness and cognition are destroyed" (Leys 2), I argue that this closing vignette illustrates one of

the complexities that is negotiated throughout the novel, namely that Jack does not experience Room in the same way as Ma, and not necessarily as traumatic at all. Indeed, the major narrative shift of the novel—Ma's realization that she must convince her son to play an active part in their plan to escape from Room—is complicated precisely by the fact that Jack does not seem to experience his life or his environment as fundamentally traumatizing, and must therefore be convinced of the urgency of the situation. While theorists such as Cathy Caruth note that a traumatic event "may or may not be catastrophic, and may not traumatize everyone equally" (4), I suggest that *Room* goes one step further in its theorization of trauma, asking readers to consider if it is in fact the *external framing* of Jack's experiences in Room that is traumatic for him, rather than his experiences in and of themselves. In contrasting his experience of captivity and freedom with that of Ma, and in exploring how Ma struggles to convey the seriousness of their experiences while also protecting Jack from pathologization, I argue that *Room* calls attention to the ways in which traumatic experiences are shaped by and in conversation with the very definitions of trauma that we have constructed. In doing so, I propose that *Room* offers a critical intervention into contemporary theorizations of trauma not only in terms of the strategies that Donoghue employs to represent traumatic experience, but also in the ways it complicates the very notion of how trauma is determined.

Central to the novel's attempts to complicate the binary of "ordinary" versus "traumatic" experiences is Donoghue's choice to narrate the story from the perspective of a five-year-old boy. While Donoghue admits that her decision to do so was in part a means of making "such a horrifying premise original, involving, but also more bearable," and that "[Jack's] innocence would at least partly shield the reader on their descent into the abyss" ("On 'Room'" n. pag.), she also acknowledges that her choice of narrative voice pushes back against the numerous tropes that have become part and parcel of how mainstream crime stories are told. When asked by a reader if she had ever even considered including different perspectives in the novel, Donoghue categorically responded that she had not:

> No . . . I didn't. [John Fowles' *The Collector*] does such a good job of capturing the mindset of a capturer, and also that's become a banal trope of every second crime novel: the weirdo, fetishistic watcher/stalker/kidnapper/kidnapper of women or children. So I never wanted to give Old Nick that much prominence in my novel; just as Ma does, I chose to keep him at arm's length, not letting him set the terms of the story. And as for telling it from Ma's point of view, I can't imagine how to do that without the novel degenerating into a tearjerker, because at every

> point Ma knows all the reasons to be sad. Nor did I think any of the experts or other adults (such as Grandma) needed their own narration; I thought I could put their sense of Ma and Jack across through reported dialogue. So no, I held to my conviction that *Room* would either have the virtue of originality through being Jack's tale, or it shouldn't be told at all. (qtd. in Halford n. pag.)

Donoghue's concern about engaging either side of the victim/perpetrator binary as a choice for narrative perspective resonates with the work of contemporary feminist theorists such as Sorcha Gunne and Zoë Brigley Thompson, who identify an increasing need for "literary rape narratives that refuse voyeurism and exploitation" (3). Gunne and Thompson do not merely advocate for literary representations of rape that move away from explicit descriptions of violence towards something less gratuitous, but rather, point out the need for "radical readings of rape narratives [that] confront the uncomfortable and shocking nature of sexual violence in [ways] that are themselves shocking and uncomfortable and break the mould of the victim/perpetrator binary" (3). In her interview responses, Donoghue powerfully articulates the dilemma faced by authors if they choose to dispense with a third-person omniscient narrator in favour of one that is more intimately connected with a particular character. Often, scenes of assault may feature only two characters in a particular instance of trauma—the victim and the perpetrator—both of whose perspectives come with particular biases, strengths, and narrative consequences. As Donoghue notes of her refusal to let Old Nick "set the terms of the story," voicing stories of rape and captivity from the perspective of the perpetrator risks mirroring, in narrative terms, the violent control that perpetrators maintain over their victims' bodies as well as their subjectivities.

However, as Laura Tanner observes, readers might find themselves usefully unsettled when they are "located in discomforting proximity to the violator, pressured toward a subject position that he or she finds repugnant and frightening" (10). As with first-person narratives of trauma such as those found in works of life-writing, voicing stories from the perspective of the victim risks inciting a form of affective appropriation of a particular subject position, causing the reader to either over-identify or misidentify with a character's experience of violence. Yet, as Tanner argues, this choice may also productively affect readers who are otherwise reluctant to engage with depictions of the suffering body; by pushing a reader into "a position of discomforting proximity to the victim's vulnerable body" (10), such narratives may be able to "collapse the distance between a disembodied reader and a victim defined by embodiment" (10). No matter which narrative choice is made in telling a story about sexual violence, authors such as

Donoghue are taking significant risks. They must consider questions about the perceived credibility of a narrator, as well as the ways in which either a perpetrator's violent control or a victim's traumatized experience might simply be viewed with the same gaze: one that sees sexualized and gendered violence as both easy and pleasurable to consume. By foregrounding Jack's perspective, which is that of a limited observer to the victim/perpetrator dynamic between his mother and Old Nick, Donoghue offers a critique of the fraught positions of both witness and victim (as well as victims who may not realize they are victims), unsettles her readers by making the act of textual interpretation significantly more complicated, and, ultimately, also subverts readers' expectations of narrative and visual pleasure.

A number of reviews of Donoghue's novel discuss not only the uniqueness of her young narrator, but also his credibility. Anita Shreve writes that Jack is an "entirely credible, endearing little boy" (qtd. in Donoghue i), and Stephen Amidon declares that Jack's narration "gives the novel its startling authenticity" (n. pag.). While such statements may seem to be innocuous commentaries on the novelty of Jack's character, or praise for Donoghue's method of creating such a convincing childhood voice,[1] they miss capturing the possibilities of a more critical reading of Jack's voice, one that reflects what Gunne and Thompson declare as a necessary intervention into the genre of rape/abuse narratives: a voice that is neither simplistically that of the victim or the perpetrator. While Jack is obviously connected to Ma's traumatic experiences within Room, and certainly shows a very real fear of Old Nick (because Old Nick hurts his mother), Jack often functions as a witness to traumatic interactions, one whose voice is used to report events back to the implied reader. Because Jack is a child, his witnessing of the violence between Old Nick and Ma (as well as Ma's ongoing symptoms of trauma) does not necessarily project the same kinds of interpretive framework onto these experiences as those that might be conveyed by an adult narrator, by an older child narrator, or by a child narrator who was not always already in Room.

However, Jack is far from being a *tabula rasa*. As the novel opens, readers become privy to the ways in which life in captivity has undeniably shaped Jack's perspective of the world, including his sense of reality. In a telling passage, Jack has difficulty understanding the relationship between his own existence and those of the people he sees on television:

> Mountains are too big to be real, I saw one in TV that has a woman hanging on it by ropes. Women aren't real like Ma is, and girls and boys not either. Men aren't real except Old Nick, and I'm not actually sure if he's real for real. Maybe half? He brings groceries and Sundaytreat and disappears the trash, but he's not human

like us. He only happens in the night, like bats. Maybe Door makes him up with a *beep beep* and the air changes. I think Ma doesn't like to talk about him in case he gets realer. (23)

What stands out in this passage are the ways in which Jack's seemingly "uninformed" or "naive" observations mirror the difficulties of experience and representation that constrain the consumption of many forms of media and narrative, including but not limited to those about trauma. Moreover, Jack's suggestion that Old Nick is "maybe half" real suggests a form of partial perspective—what Donna Haraway might call a form of "situated knowledge," one that rejects the possibility of singular modes of objective knowledge-formation—that can and should be validated, particularly because Jack is a child narrator. After all, Jack is fully aware of the profound impact that Old Nick has on his mother. Even though Jack's direct knowledge of Old Nick is limited to what "happens in the night," he nevertheless makes the keen observation of Ma's reluctance to talk about him "in case he gets realer." He notices details about his mother's pain—"Ma's sitting in her chair holding her face, that means hurting" (56)—and after an incident during which Old Nick strangles Ma, Jack realizes that the physical violence has escalated: "I see her neck again, the marks that he put on her, I'm all done giggling" (68). Resonating throughout Jack's descriptions of acts he witnesses is a strong sense of Old Nick's malevolence, yet Jack does not sensationalize or graphically describe the crimes that Old Nick commits. Even early in the passage that questions whether or not Old Nick is "real for real," Old Nick is not described as monstrous or foreboding: rather, he is simply described as "not human like us" (23). Jack's characterization of Old Nick is thus encoded, like so many of Jack's observations, with a double meaning for the reader: for Jack, Old Nick's inhumanity is a reflection of a relationship to Jack's visual field (since Ma keeps Jack out of sight in Wardrobe when Old Nick is around); for us, he is not human because of the ways his crimes square with our ideas about perpetrators and what it means to be "humane."

Both Donoghue's re-imagining of narrative perspective and her refusal to represent trauma within a traditional or singular framework are particularly evident in one of the novel's most haunting scenes: Old Nick's rape of Ma. While it is already understood that the rapes are a frequent occurrence, Donoghue nevertheless gives her reader insights into how Jack actually perceives sexual violence:

Lamp goes off *snap*, that makes me jump. I don't mind dark but I don't like when it surprises me. I lie down under Blanket and I wait.

When Old Nick creaks Bed, I listen and count fives on my fingers, tonight it's

> 217 creaks. I always have to count till he makes that gaspy sound and stops. I don't know what would happen if I didn't count, because I always do.
>
> What about the nights I'm asleep?
>
> I don't know, maybe Ma does the counting.
>
> After the 217 it's all quiet. (48)

Unlike narratives of sexual assault that employ graphic and obvious descriptions of sexual violence, Jack's interpretation of the event requires a significant amount of interpretive work on the part of the readers, who cannot simply be passive consumers of a rape scene, but rather, must make the devastating connection between Jack's description of Old Nick's 217 creaks of Bed, his "gaspy sound," and the physical realities of the assault on Ma. While Jack does not understand the relationship of these details to sexual violence, the reader certainly does—if not immediately, then fairly quickly. For Ma, this experience is clearly that of *rape* as we understand it; for Jack, it is something else that operates only within his limited experience, knowledge, visual field, and vocabulary.

Laura Tanner argues that one of the most problematic aspects of rape narratives is the manner in which textuality can cause the reader to "access the fictional world by abandoning the body that anchors him or her to a material universe and [enter] imaginatively into a fictional scene" (9). Furthermore, Tanner cautions that "even as representations of violation invoke and revise the reader's understanding of the way in which actual violence works, they do so through the manipulation of words, images, and literary forms that often function to efface rather than to unveil the materiality of the victimized body" (9). Strictly speaking, Jack's description of Ma's rape is, on the surface, a form of effacement or silencing of the violence she must endure. From the perspective of the reader, however, it is anything but. By forcing readers to do an act of textual-to-physical translation from Jack's literal interpretation of the sounds he hears, Donoghue makes visible the materiality of the victimized body. Readers must consider how and why they understand what could otherwise be interpreted by a child as the sounds of consensual sex—a creaking bed, the vocalizations of orgasm—as the sounds of sexual violence. In doing so, the embodied (rather than the legal) line between consensual sex and rape becomes narrowed: Jack's viewpoint is no longer simple or uncomplicated, but rather one that forces readers to acknowledge the complexities of sexual violence, namely that it does not always look (or sound) the way we imagine sexual violence to be.

Haraway's framework of situated knowledges resonates here not only in terms of the problems of spectacle and the privileging of vision that often

arises in cases of sexualized or gendered violence (or, as feminist film critic Laura Mulvey has noted, in terms of the construction of the female body in film and visual culture more generally), but also in terms of the ways in which it opens up space for other forms of knowing; and indeed, for forms of knowing that are more partial and fragmentary. Too often, we approach children's knowledge as lacking when compared to adults' frames of reference. Yet, as Donoghue's novel illustrates, children's perspectives constitute nuanced understandings of the world. Children are often the ones who pick up on phenomena or language that adults might otherwise miss.

While Jack is not physically abused in the novel—since Ma goes to great lengths to shield him from Old Nick—there is no doubt that after he and Ma escape from Room, doctors and interviewers alike imply that his experiences, his memory, and his perception have all been deeply and negatively affected by the conditions of his upbringing. In the section of *Room* entitled "After," when Ma and Jack have escaped and are being evaluated and treated in a hospital, Dr. Clay tells Ma that Jack is

> like a newborn in many ways, despite his remarkably accelerated literacy and numeracy . . . As well as immune issues, there are likely to be challenges in the area of, let's see, social adjustment, obviously, sensory modulation—filtering and sorting all the stimuli barraging him—plus difficulties with spatial perception. (182)

Just a page later in the scene, Donoghue features an interaction between Jack and Dr. Clay that, in my reading, straddles the line between an accurate depiction of rightful concerns on the part of mental health professionals and a criticism of the techniques of persuasive or leading questioning of children:

> "I'm going to ask a question," says Dr. Clay, "but you don't have to answer it unless you want to. OK?"
>
> I look at him then back at the pictures. Old Nick's stuck in the numbers and he can't get out.
>
> "Did this man ever do anything you didn't like?"
>
> I nod.
>
> "Can you tell me what he did?"
>
> "He cutted off the power so the vegetables went slimy."
>
> "Right. Did he ever hurt you?"
>
> Ma says, "Don't—"
>
> Dr. Clay puts his hand up. "Nobody's doubting your word," he tells her. "But think of all the nights you were asleep. I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't ask Jack himself, now, would I?" (235)

On the one hand, Dr. Clay, who questions Jack despite Ma's reassurances that Old Nick did not harm him, perceives him as a credible witness capable

of relaying his own story; on the other hand, Jack is seen as a blank slate upon which new information can be imprinted. In another discussion, Dr. Clay tells Ma that the "very best thing you did was, you got him out early . . . At five, they're still plastic" (268). From Dr. Clay's perspective, Jack is a traumatized young boy who is still young enough for traumatic symptoms not to manifest themselves in the same ways as they would for Ma or for an older child. Jack, who is listening to this interaction, has a telling reaction. Thinking quietly to himself, Jack reasons: "but I'm not plastic, I'm a real boy" (268). Because Jack situates himself as a "real boy" and not merely "plastic," readers are asked to consider whether or not the impact of Jack's experiences in Room can be taken at his word (or Ma's) alone, and more importantly, whether or not Jack needs to undergo a process of psychological plasticity in order to "recover." Certainly, Jack has experienced physical consequences of his time in Room that necessitate medical intervention (e.g., vaccinations, a mask to protect his immune system while he adjusts to new environments), but such precautions do not necessarily correlate to the need for psychological or emotional interventions. While Dr. Clay suggests that Jack will probably forget his time in Room, and that such forgetting "will be a mercy" (269), Jack himself expresses doubts—even bordering on defiance—about this external framing of his experiences:

> "Dr. Clay said I was made of plastic and I'd forget."
> "Ah," says Ma. "He figures, soon you won't remember Room anymore."
> "I will too." I stare at her. "Am I meant to forget?"
> "I don't know." (270)

Outside of Room, not only does Jack begin to express newfound uncertainty about his experiences, but Ma also begins to question whether or not Jack is or is not traumatized or permanently negatively affected by his experiences. As Dr. Clay lists the various issues Jack might face—"social adjustment, obviously, sensory modulation" (233)—Ma begins to express doubt about whether or not Jack is all right: "Ma's got her head in her hands. 'I thought he was OK. More or less'" (233). As he observes the exchange between Dr. Clay and Ma, Jack poses himself a crucial question: "Am I not OK?" (233). Jack's querying of whether or not he is OK appears to be a question directed not only internally (one that provokes self-doubt), but also directed externally (either to the reader, or to Dr. Clay and Ma), a questioning of whose measures would be used to gauge whether or not he is OK.

While Jack is the primary character around whom the complexities of defining traumatic experiences circulate, Ma is not exempt from struggling to

narrate her experiences without external impositions. Although she encounters the frustrations of having traumatic narratives imposed on her during her consultations with Dr. Clay, the trauma of having her story constantly framed and reframed through the most extreme terms of trauma culminates in the interview scene that takes place between Ma and the journalist who has secured an exclusive interview with her. Insistent upon accompanying his mother to the interview, Jack sits quietly and observes. As a witness who prioritizes and pays attention to his mother's discomfort during the interview, he is obviously not a purely objective witness. Yet, the details that he notices in his mother's reactions to the interviewer's questioning, combined with the dialogue that he reports, function to further illustrate the ways in which the media's insistent framing of traumatic narratives is, in many ways, precisely that which creates or compounds an individual's trauma.

Mere moments into the interview, after a series of problematic questions and trite statements, the journalist knowingly and deliberately provokes an emotional reaction in Ma by mentioning the stillbirth that Ma experienced prior to Jack's birth. Her affective response to the interviewer's ambush is palpable: "Ma's hands are shaking, she puts them under her legs" (299). With what appears to be clear knowledge of her tactics' effects on Ma, the interviewer nevertheless presses forward, framing her manipulative practices not as a predatory technique, but rather as a form of assistance to Ma: "'Believe me,' the woman is saying to Ma, 'we're just trying to help *you* tell *your* story to the world'" (299). As the conversation continues, Ma defiantly challenges the interviewer's framing of her experiences, articulating that she is becoming "irritated, actually" (303). For Ma, it is important to consider trauma both as part of a spectrum of lived experiences, as well as something that is deeply embedded within the "ordinary" or daily experiences of large portions of the population, particularly within certain historical and political contexts:

> "I wish people would stop treating us like we're the only ones who ever lived through something terrible. I've been finding stuff on the Internet you wouldn't believe."
>
> "Other cases like yours?"
>
> "Yeah but not just—I mean, of course when I woke up in that shed, I thought nobody'd ever had it as bad as me. But the thing is, slavery's not a new invention. And solitary confinement—did you know, in America we've got more than twenty-five thousand prisoners in isolation cells? Some of them for more than twenty years?" (304)

Far from minimizing or denying the severity of her own experiences, Ma locates them instead within a framework that acknowledges trauma

as a sociopolitical (rather than a merely individual or psychological) phenomenon, as well as one that, in both historical and contemporary contexts, has resulted in certain events often not being viewed as "traumatic" at all. Ma's commentary thus serves to re-articulate the ways in which the distinctions between "ordinary" and "traumatic" experiences are not globally or historically consistent, but rather are determined by structures of power that at various times and spaces seek to either deny or validate oppression. My analysis echoes the work of feminist theorists such as Laura S. Brown, who noted in 1995 that the first iteration of the PTSD diagnosis in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* of the American Psychiatric Association asserted that a traumatic event had to be "an event outside the range of human experience" (qtd. in Brown 100). Citing her work with an incest survivor whose experience of trauma was refuted by a defense attorney on the grounds that incest was "relatively common" (101), Brown asks: "How could such an event which happens so often to women, so often in the life of one woman, be outside the range of human experience?" (101). As Brown later points out, the very definition of trauma was built primarily on the experiences of those who hold the most power:

> The dominant, after all, writes the diagnostic manuals and informs the public discourse, on which we have built our images of "real" trauma. "Real" trauma is often only that form of trauma in which the dominant group can participate as a victim rather than as the perpetrator or etiologist of the trauma. The private, secret, insidious traumas to which a feminist analysis draws attention are more often than not those events in which the dominant culture and its forms and institutions are perpetuated. Feminist analysis also asks us to understand how the constant presence and threat of trauma in the lives of girls and women of all colours, men of colour in the United States, lesbian and gay people, people in poverty, and people with disabilities has shaped our society, a continuing background noise rather than an unusual event. (102-03)

Ma does not perceive her trauma as operating completely outside of the spectrum of "quotidian" trauma that many people experience, and in turn, also suggests that Jack's experience is no more or less traumatic than the suffering that many people undergo. When directly asked by the interviewer whether or not she thinks Jack has "been shaped—damaged—by his ordeal," Ma clearly articulates that "it wasn't an ordeal to Jack, it was just how things were. And yeah, maybe, but everybody's damaged by something" (304).

Not content with Ma's appraisal of her experiences (or with Ma's commentaries on trauma more generally), the interviewer swiftly moves in to once again reinforce the idea that Jack was unable to experience a

"normal" childhood, going so far as to question whether or not Ma should have asked Old Nick to take Jack away so that he "could have had a normal, happy childhood with a loving family" (306). The more the interviewer imposes conventional notions of trauma onto Ma's and Jack's experiences, the more Ma becomes agitated, as reported through Jack's observations: at various points, Ma's "eyes go even tighter" (301), her "voice [gets] loud again" (303), she "nearly snarls" a response (305), and by the end of the interview, her "voice is all hoarse" (306). The last few lines of the scene illustrate the stark contrast between the interviewer's seeming pleasure and Ma's own profound physical discomfort at the forced framing of her narrative: "The woman does a little laugh. Ma's got tears coming down her face, she puts up her hands to catch them" (306). By the end of the scene, it becomes clear that it is not necessarily Ma's trauma that pushes her to the point of emotional breakdown, but rather the trauma induced by the interviewer's violent attempts to shape, control, and manipulate Ma's narrative. As Donoghue's novel makes clear in this scene in particular, it is not only perpetrators or perpetrator narratives that can enact violence against victims' stories and subjectivities, but also those who have other forms of narrative control and power, such as the media who enact a kind of public violence.

That violence is inextricable from its circulation as both public experience and public cultural object is, of course, not a new theoretical position. In *Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film* (2004), Tanya Horeck argues that rape has achieved a public status. After pointing out that "at first glance, the term [public rape] seems paradoxical" (4), Horeck argues that "cultural images of rape serve as a means of forging social bonds, and of mapping out public space. It is a crime that has a pervasive effect on the life of the community and the workings of the body politic. And it is a crime that dominates public fantasies regarding sexual and social difference" (4). Horeck's argument is crucial in understanding the dual nature of sexual violence, experienced on the one hand as an intimate and psychologically private event, and on the other, as that which is embedded in public discourses and policies, ranging from aesthetic representations to awareness campaigns. I want to unpack the various parts of Horeck's argument here, and link them to the similar kinds of theorizing in which Donoghue's novel engages. Certainly, Ma's abduction and repeated sexual assaults create fissures in the social fabric, not only in terms of her relationship to her parents, but also in her relationship to Jack, particularly on days when she is "Gone," that is to say, dissociated, quiet, and disengaged with him.

Moreover, the type of sexual violence she experiences—an abduction and repeated rapes—reinforces numerous mythologies about where in social and physical space such assaults occur. The threat of sexual violence perpetrated by strangers that pervades the life of many individuals (particularly girls and women) is one that generally reinforces the notion that sexual violence is a public threat that then goes on to affect private lives in the form of psychic trauma. Rather, as Horeck and others point out, when it comes to violence, there is a mutual flow between public and private spheres, not only in terms of by whom and where violence is committed (generally by individuals known to the victims) but also in terms of the discourses used to speak about violence.

What makes *Room* so compelling for thinking through trauma in literature is precisely the attention it pays to both public and private spheres, and the ways in which the experiences of Jack and Ma are reshaped once they and their stories are no longer contained within an 11' x 11' space. The moment of their escape from Room occurs almost precisely at the midway point of the novel: equal attention is given to exploring both the private experience of captivity and the public reception of that private experience. Indeed, this rupture between private and public events is reflected in the names Donoghue gives to the various sections of her novel. The first, "Presents" (perhaps a nod to its homonym "presence" as well as a reference to "Sundaytreat"), focuses very much on Room as a distinctly private sphere, particularly for Jack. Jack is happy and engaged, and while he expresses fear about Old Nick, he is thoroughly content with the boundaries of his small world (which he perceives as his/the entire world). In "Unlying," Ma is forced to convey to Jack that there is an Outside to Room, and that it is indeed as real as Room is. At first, Jack believes that it is a trick, but Ma later tells him that he "[has] to let her tell this story" (120). At the very end of "Unlying," Jack begins to realize not only that there may be an outside/public world that informs his own, but also that his life in Room is no longer as innocuous as he once thought: "My tummy creaks really loud and I figure it out, why Ma's telling me the whole story. She's telling me that we're going" (125). It is after this line that the section "Dying" begins, which indicates not only the fact that Jack will have to pretend to be dead in order to facilitate an escape for Ma and himself, but also that his abrupt entrance into both the physical world at large as well as a world in which his experiences are no longer "normal" will be a kind of symbolic death, one similar to that faced by Ma.

"Dying" is immediately followed not by "Living" (the novel's final section), as might be expected, but by "After," a word which at once represents the reality of moving past imprisonment, but that also indicates the possibility to disrupt the often simplistic binaries of death/life, trauma/ordinary life, tragedy/happiness. "After" is a space of complexity and paradox, wherein Ma, rather than Jack, ends up being the person who has the most difficulty adjusting to life outside of Room. In presenting the complicated aftermath of traumatic events (rather than simply ending the novel on a point of elation at the point of escape), Donoghue also contravenes popular mythologies that may frame traumatic recovery as a more or less linear process. While Ma expresses fear that she and Jack might be killed while in Room, it is only after their escape that she comes close to death, in the form of a suicide attempt: "we got out, I saved her, only then she didn't want to be alive anymore" (336), Jack reflects. This attempt not only nearly fulfills her greatest fear while in captivity—dying—but also forces her for the first time ever to be apart from Jack while she recovers. Both death and separation from her son seem like wholly unpredictable and undesirable outcomes for Ma after she has struggled for seven years to keep herself and her son together and alive. Yet, Donoghue's inclusion of these events does further work to subvert the notion that trauma follows any sort of ordinary logic or pattern of predictability. Cathy Caruth, in an effort to gain "insight into the enigmatic relation between trauma and survival" (9), cites Sigmund Freud's work on the death drive and the ways in which the state of war became a "traumatic imposition of life" for many in the wake of World War I. While it is seemingly paradoxical that one should want to die after one has escaped death, a significant facet of trauma is that "for those who undergo [it], it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic; that *survival itself*, in other words, *can be a crisis*" (Caruth 9; emphasis original). Although survival does prove to reach a crisis point for Ma (in the form of a suicide attempt), Donoghue makes clear that as in Jack's case, Ma's struggles are not necessarily operating within a traumatic binary that locates her experiences in total opposition to "ordinary" life. In "Living," when Ma bemoans the fact that her newfound dislike of company is "not how I remember myself" (405), Dr. Clay attempts to frame her emergent social anxiety within the language of trauma, suggesting that she "had to change to survive" (405). Yet, Noreen (a nurse) points out, "Don't forget, you'd have changed anyway. Moving into your twenties, having a child—you wouldn't have stayed the same" (406). Living, after all, keeps happening whether one is out in the world or confined in a small garden shed.

In ending this analysis of *Room*, I return to where I started: with the closing moments of the novel. Shortly before the farewell visit to Room, Jack queries whether or not Old Nick is an anomaly, echoing discussions about whether or not trauma—and those who perpetrate trauma against others—exists, as previous clinical terminology has declared, "outside the range" of human experience:

> "Grandma says there's more of him."
> "What?"
> "Persons like him, in the world."
> "Ah," says Ma.
> "Is it true?"
> "Yeah. But the tricky thing is, there's far more people in the middle."
> "Where?"
> Ma's staring out the window but I don't know at what. "Somewhere between good and bad," she says. "Bits of both stuck together." (409)

While Ma understandably perceives Old Nick as a monstrous individual who she wishes were dead because of his actions towards her, she nevertheless acknowledges that people's capacities for cruelty (much like her own experiences of trauma, and much like Jack's upbringing in Room) require a much more complex theoretical model than the simple binary of good or bad. Ultimately, *Room* demonstrates that trauma is not only steeped in complexity—and at times, even paradox—but that it is also part of a series of organizing principles that need to be fundamentally interrogated for the various mythologies and assumptions that they bring to and sometimes impose upon individual experiences of violence. "Trauma," over-determined as it is by numerous layers of psychological and sociopolitical discourses, may not always be the best term available, may not always resonate with any given individual at any given time, and indeed may not fit traditional psychiatric or psychoanalytic frameworks or diagnoses. However, Donoghue's novel does not dispense with the notion of trauma entirely, nor does it suggest that trauma is not a potentially useful framework for thinking through experiences of violence. Jack's ambivalent statement at the end of the novel—that Room is "a hole where something happened" (414)—does not mean that there is not the capacity for the memory of Room to later become a source of deep distress and despair: after all, a key component of trauma is precisely its belatedness. Donoghue is not asking her readers to determine whether Jack *is* or *is not* traumatized, but rather, to consider that traumatization, as it is clinically understood, is merely one possible outcome of his experience. As such, a rigorous engagement with individuals'

witnessing or experiencing of violence not only requires a dynamic and shifting approach to the idea of trauma, but the expansion of possibilities for complex, individual, and alternative experiences of the world.

NOTES

1 In an interview with *The New Yorker*, Donoghue describes the process by which she created Jack's voice. She explains: "I didn't draft Jack's thoughts in Adult and then translate them into Kid, because no adult would have those thoughts in that order. Writing in Kid from the start (once I had figured out exactly what peculiar dialect of age-five-but-hyper-educated Kid he would start) was what helped me invent not only what thoughts would occur to Jack but what their zigzag sequence of association would be" (Halford n. pag.). Central to Donoghue's process was also the creation of a dictionary of Jack's particular vocabulary and verbal mannerisms: "Just as in previous novels I put together a mini-dictionary of how people spoke in 1788 or 1864, this time I made myself a dictionary of my son's kid-English, then narrowed it down to some classic errors and grammatical oddities that would not seriously confuse readers" (Halford n. pag.).

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