

# Trauma Without Event: Structural Violence and Gendered Survival in Leila Mottley's *Nightcrawling*

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines Leila Mottley's *Nightcrawling* (2022) through the lens of Postclassical Trauma Theory, arguing that the novel redefines trauma as a structural and cultural condition rather than a singular psychological wound. A notable critical gap remains in the limited application of Postclassical Trauma Theory to *Nightcrawling*, particularly in relation to the interconnected experiences of urban displacement, precarity, policing, and gendered vulnerability. This study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach grounded in close textual analysis and guided by Postclassical Trauma Theory, with attention to concepts such as cultural trauma, structural violence, collective memory, and gendered embodiment. Moving beyond classical models of individual suffering, the study explores how trauma in *Nightcrawling* emerges through collective deprivation, systemic neglect, and the normalization of violence within Oakland's marginalized communities. The analysis demonstrates that Mottley portrays trauma as an environmental and intergenerational phenomenon, embedded in social institutions such as housing, policing, and incarceration. Drawing on the works of Michelle Balaev, Stef Craps, and Saidiya Hartman, the article contends that the novel articulates a distinctly postclassical vision of trauma—one shaped by communal grief, precarity, and gendered vulnerability. Kiara's experiences of poverty, sexual exploitation, and familial absence reveal how trauma operates across social and bodily terrains, linking personal endurance to broader cultural survival. Ultimately, the study argues that *Nightcrawling* transforms trauma from an individual memory into a collective archive of resilience, asserting the need to reimagine trauma narratives within the intersecting frameworks of race, gender, and systemic inequality.

**Keywords:** collective memory, cultural trauma, gendered violence, Leila Mottley, postclassical trauma theory

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, trauma has become one of the most influential frameworks in literary and cultural studies, which shapes the critical debates about how literature represents violence, loss, and the aftereffects of catastrophic events. However, Classical trauma theorists such as Caruth (1996) as well as Felman and Laub (1992) have argued that trauma disrupts conventional modes of storytelling, producing fragmented structures, silences, and repetitions that mirror the workings of traumatic memory. Because of this perspective, literature becomes both a witness to and an expression of suffering, giving form to what resists articulation. Besides that, this approach has been important for showing how trauma affects the mind, it has also been criticized for assuming everyone experiences it the same way and for focusing too much on personal psychological breakdowns, by treating belatedness, unspeakability or



silence, and fragmentation as transhistorical features of trauma, early models risk marginalizing the specific social and historical contexts that shape how trauma is experienced and represented (LaCapra, 2001; Luckhurst, 2008).

In recent years, the emergence of postclassical trauma theory has become a clear sign of an important transition from a simple general concept of trauma to a more complex understanding associated with the historical and cultural contexts in which collective trauma experiences take shape. However, this is also confirmed by several researchers, such as Craps (2013), Kaplan (2005), and Balaev (2012), who argue that trauma in the new notion cannot be understood in isolation from the major social systems that surround it, such as colonialism, racism, poverty, and gender-based violence, because these factors contribute to the entrenchment and perpetuation of trauma. Moreover, this approach views trauma as something rooted in shared, cultural, and intergenerational experiences, where it questions earlier Eurocentric and event-focused models, moving the attention from the idea that trauma is unspeakable to exploring how fiction represents it through social customs, rituals, and collective memories. Additionally, Balaev (2012) explains that trauma narratives not only depict suffering but also reimagine cultural identity and collective strength, which push toward postclassical models that enable a broader understanding of trauma as both personal and structural, individual and collective. Thus, the trauma concept is not that simple to define and understand as it was presented in the nineties. Instead, it is elevated into various forms and produces more theories using it as a basis for creation.

Leila Mottley's *Nightcrawling* (2022), the debut novel of the youngest-ever Booker Prize–longlisted author, provides a strikingly contemporary setting for exploring these dynamics, telling the story of Kiara, a young Black woman in Oakland who lives amid poverty, dislocation, and systemic neglect. In other words, the novel actually demonstrates that trauma is not passed down in a simple, direct way but moves through communities and cultures. In fact, it shapes how people live and relate to one another. *Nightcrawling* illustrates how inherited grief, economic instability, and even exploitation are all integrated within a person's life, as the setting of the novel, which is Oakland, where people don't have a stable place to call home, is being policed by people who don't understand them. Community is falling apart and has turned into a physical and symbolic map of pain and despair. Well-known in the post-classical tradition of trauma, *Nightcrawling* shows us that this kind of pain is not a single event, but a continuous social problem. It puts the story of hardiness and community loss right at the heart of the equation, not in individual minds, but in the networks of unfairness that control the lives of urban Black people.

Trauma theory has been extensively applied to literature; much of its critical discourse continues to center on Euro-American contexts, particularly Holocaust narratives and Western models of catastrophe (Caruth, 1996; LaCapra, 2001). Recent postclassical studies, however, call for expanding trauma's theoretical scope to include marginalized and non-Western voices (Craps, 2013; Kaplan, 2005). Taking into account Mottley's *Nightcrawling*, it is striking that despite its engagement with the realities of trauma in relation to racialized poverty, racialized policing, and gendered violence, there hasn't been much written about it from this perspective. To fill this gap, this study argues that Mottley's novel epitomizes the postclassical view of trauma, showing that it can be a hurtful scar that has been left by society's well-known systems of racial and economic oppression. *Nightcrawling's* narration of cultural heritage, inherited sorrow, and the resilience of a community extends the definition of what is seen as traumatic and pushes the study of trauma to be more diverse, moving beyond its traditional Eurocentric way of understanding the concept.

Many stages of trauma theory have been widely used in literary studies and have remained centered on contemporary European models, linked to the general conception of trauma as an individual and immediate event. Furthermore, post-classical trauma theory has clearly broadened this scope, focusing on collective pain, structural violence, and the various

cultural forms through which trauma is transmitted to the individual. However, this concept has not been adequately applied to Layla Motley's *Nightcrawling*. Furthermore, while most critical studies of this novel have focused on its social dimension, particularly its themes of exploitation and gender-based injustice, no study has directly addressed these elements together as contributing factors to collective and structural trauma. Therefore, this study aims to bridge this gap by reading the novel through the lens of post-classical trauma theory. From this perspective, the novel is described as presenting a cultural and social shock that affects everyone due to gender, rather than simply being a traumatic experience for the isolated individual.

### **Review of literature**

The field of trauma studies has undergone significant theoretical evolution since its emergence in the early 1990s, with important works such as *Unclaimed Experience* by Cathy Caruth (1996) and *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing* by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992). They defined trauma as an intense experience that is difficult to fully express or understand. However, these classical frameworks focused on other concepts, such as delay, repetition, and the difficulty of expressing pain, as they were clearly influenced by other theories, especially psychoanalysis. This model was soon criticized because of its focus on abstract European experiences, such as Holocaust trauma, and neglected other models that emerged as a result of colonialism, slavery, and others (Luckhurst, 2008; LaCapra, 2001). Moreover, because of these criticisms, postclassical trauma theory has shown a more comprehensive and sensitive framework than its predecessors, such as Stef Craps (2013) in his book *Postcolonial Witnessing* that trauma should be understood far from harsh individual memory, through the intertwined conditions of race, history, and cultural memory. Moreover, Michelle Balaev (2012) believes that narratives of trauma in literature reveal the interplay between individual suffering and collective cultural structures. In the same way, Kaplan (2005) and Hirsch (2012) emphasize the importance of postmemory and cultural transmission, in which the effects of trauma are inherited and re-experienced across generations. This expanded framework situates trauma within historical, spatial, and environmental contexts, recognizing that structural forces, such as poverty in areas where social class discrimination is evident, racism that can be another face of being poor, and violence against women, continually reproduce traumatic conditions rather than resolving them. As a comparative touchstone, some scholars like Sasani and Arjmandi (2018) put side by side Caruth's event-centered model with Balaev's contextual approach, which makes a clear illustration of how postclassical readings move trauma from a private psychic break to a culturally rooted which shaped by culture and history.

The Black and feminist scholars focus on how fiction produced trauma within the race, gender, and patriarchal oppression, which later it became a central debate to many of them, like Saidiya Hartman's book *Scenes of Subjection* (1997) and Christina Sharpe's book *In the Wake: On Blackness, and Being* (2016) rethinking trauma as an afterlife of slavery a continuous condition that embedded in social and political structures. These scholars believe that Black life in the modern world is lived under "the wake" of historical violence, where surviving as a group becomes a way to resist oppression. Based on that, recent studies like Evans have examined how contemporary African American women writers narrate trauma through Collective grief, instability, and strength, which expand the trauma theory to include everyday forms of surviving. The Government and sociological reports on urban poverty and policing in the United States (U.S. Department of Justice, 2016; Butler & Grabinsky, 2020) in the same way, they show the real-life conditions that shape how Mottley portrays Oakland as a place marked by structural violence, so despite *Nightcrawling's* critical acclaim in literary circles (Fan, 2022; Jefferys, 2022), and others if any the scholarly engagement with the novel within this area remains scarce. To date, no peer-reviewed academic work has applied trauma theory

to Mottley's fiction, leaving a notable gap in trauma studies and African American literary criticism. All in all, by applying postclassical trauma theory to this novel, this article fills that gap, putting *Nightcrawling* within a growing body of fiction that redefines trauma as cultural, collective, and gendered Lewis (2023). The review of these sources can establish the theoretical foundation in order to show how Mottley's novel transforms personal suffering into communal strength and challenges the notions that forces that keep trauma alive in marginalized communities.

## **METHOD**

This study adopts a qualitative, hermeneutic approach based on accurate textual reading, through the use of postclassical trauma theory as an analytical lens. Moving the concept of trauma from a model that focuses on the discourse and psychoanalysis of the individual, to approaches that link trauma to the collective and cultural and even historical contexts, this study in *Nightcrawling* adopts trauma as the result of a social structure and experience experienced by the group, rather than a psychological state that belongs to the individual alone (Balaev, 2012; Craps, 2013; LaCapra, 2001; Luckhurst, 2008). Accordingly, this reading focuses on how trauma is portrayed in the novel through place, institutional practices, and communal rituals in the city of Auckland. In addition, this study looks at various elements such as collective grief, poverty and hunger, police violence, incarceration, intergenerational neglect, collective mourning, and the impact of trauma on the female body, and treats them as recurring elements in the text rather than just separate or individual themes.

Moreover, this study relies in its basic evidence on an accurate reading of the events in the novel, how they were conceived, and the way in which their scenes are constructed. This is supported by the use of quotations from the novel chosen due to their semantic and narrative importance. These passages are placed according to the chronology of the events of the novel in order to trace the evolution of collective trauma over time (Mottley, 2022). During the analysis, it will be clear how trauma manifests itself in the body, the home, and the neighborhood within the novel, as this study links its interpretive ideas to concepts from postclassical trauma theory, such as cultural trauma, structural violence, after-memory, and the influence of the environment (Hirsch, 2008; Alexander et al., 2004). Therefore, the approach in this study is a hermeneutic approach rather than an empirical one, as its goal is to explain how trauma is represented in a literary text, based on clear evidence or quotations from the novel and known academic references to support this.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Community grief & urban displacement***

Postclassical Trauma Theory helps clarify how *Nightcrawling* portrays grief not as a private experience by an individual, but as a cultural condition that is shaped by elements, such as space, policy, and unstable urban life. Instead of focusing on a single psychic break, the novel identifies injury in communal environments, where displacement, eviction, and ongoing loss repeat until they become ordinary. This approach aligns with work that redefines trauma as shaped by culture and social structures, which in fact influences group identity as much as personal memory (Balaev, 2012; Craps, 2013). In this frame, Oakland is not just a backdrop, but an active force that carries and transmits harm and pain, where its buildings, blocks, and corridors archive losses that exceed anyone's life. The resulting social geography produces a continuous, circulating trauma rather than a bounded episode (Alexander et al., 2004; LaCapra, 2001). Mottley's depiction insists that the costs of poverty and displacement are borne collectively, and that is a portrait of community grief that coheres around shared injury, where the city's mourning, in such conditions, is less a discrete ritual than a daily milieu.

Mottley, from the opening pages of her novel, portrays the apartment complex as a space of deprivation and loss of belonging. For example, the pool is normally a symbol of leisure, but it instead becomes a space or symbol of neglect and inherited exclusion, as noted in

“None of us have ever set foot in the pool... maybe because Vernon, the landlord, has never once cleaned it, but mostly because nobody ever taught none of us how to delight in the water, how to swim without gasping for breath, how to love our hair when it is matted and chlorine-soaked” (Mottley, 2022, p. 7).

In this scene, the objects around the characters hold cultural meaning, where the landlord’s neglect shows how institutions have abandoned them. One more important thing is that the lack of teaching reveals a past when they were shut out from public pleasures (Alexander et al., 2004; Eyerman, 2001). Further, the social feelings reveal how permeable the community has become under pressure, as it can be seen in “This is the kind of place you can’t distinguish your own footsteps from your neighbor’s” (Mottley, 2022, p. 7). Thus, this blending of sounds shows what newer trauma theories call environmental mediation, pain spreading through nearby lives, where the boundary between one person’s hurt and another’s is difficult to draw (Balaev, 2012; Craps, 2013). Even the hallways take on the sound and feeling of mourning after the forced relocations as “Sometimes the hallways feel like a graveyard, doors shut, people gone like they was never here” (Mottley, 2022, p. 54). The space captures loss and repetition, turning buildings into signs of deep structural harm, which is an image of home doorways portrayed as a graveyard, showing the so-called “topographies of haunting” (Luckhurst, 2008, p. 88; LaCapra, 2001).

Displacement is rendered not as an aberration but as a routine collective ordeal. Kiara’s narration of eviction notices generalizes the harm beyond a single family:

You don’t have to read one of these papers to know what they say, everyone been getting them... taped as this one and placed on the door of the studio apartment that’s been in my family for decades. We all known Vernon was a sellout... when the pockets are roaming around Oakland, looking for the next lot of us to scrape out from the city’s insides” (Mottley, 2022, p. 9).

In this quotation, the phrase “everyone been getting them” turns the eviction into cultural trauma, revealing a pattern of repeated, neighborhood-wide displacement that disconnects people from the memories tied to their homes (Kaplan, 2005). On the other hand, Mottley’s use of the metaphor “the pockets” that “scrape out” the city echoes with Rob Nixon’s idea of “slow violence,” the gradual but deeply damaging deterioration of people’s life opportunities caused by economic and political systems (Nixon, 2011). When rent spikes arrive, “Vernon says rent is doubled. He smiles like our hunger is a joke” (Mottley, 2022, p. 34). Hence, the novel tries to show how policy and profit function as forces of displacement that produce immediate material harm and lasting cultural loss, and these dynamics reflect findings on the eviction economy’s cyclical harms, where displacement serves as both a cause and a result of poverty. It is also reshaping community life around instability and loss (Desmond, 2016). In postclassical terms, these recurring losses function not simply as the background for trauma but as its driving force, producing the conditions that let grief circulate as a collective experience, which is the core notion of this theory.

Communal mourning thus emerges as the social afterlife of displacement. The city’s ordinary spaces become ritual sites where loss is collectively processed and repeated as “J’s... is one of many death hotels in East Oakland... welcoming in bodies and more bodies” (Mottley, 2022, p. 15). It is a clear observation that the line “We’ve been to enough funerals in our lives to know nobody grieving wants no damn cheese” (Mottley, 2022, p. 16) blends grief into

everyday life through cheap meals and forgotten or even unnamed streets, which shows that mourning has turned into a daily routine, nothing new, just things repeated over and over. Such scenes reflect what cultural-trauma theorists describe as the formation of shared practices, as the candles, vigils, and silences through which communities express and hold injury (Kaplan, 2005). However, they also reflect postmemory's understanding of transmission, in which the practices and affects allow later generations to come to inhabit losses they did not individually experience but nonetheless carry (Hirsch, 2008). In this space, the neighborhood breathes together in the wake of repeated displacements that they consider a daily routine, get used to it, and produce shared gestures that both preserve pain and express endurance. The combined effect of these rituals is not simply comforting, but revealing and making visible how structural violence shapes everyday life into cycles of a mixture of loss, departure, and remembrance. For that reason, *Nightcrawling* demonstrates a core postclassical insight, in which dispossession is recurrent. The mourning stops being a single event and instead becomes a cultural atmosphere and, in fact, a collective way of living through continual loss. (Craps, 2013; Eyerman, 2001).

### ***Shared precarity: Hunger, hustling, and generational neglect***

In *Nightcrawling*, deprivation is not a background texture but the structuring horizon of everyday life, and hunger becomes the clearest register of how precarity binds a community into a shared rhythm of injury. Early in the novel, Kiara narrates, "We count crackers for dinner, measure the space between hunger and sleep. Sometimes I make believe the ache in my stomach is laughter" (Mottley, 2022, p. 18). The precision of "count" turns eating into arithmetic, while the conversion of "ache" into "laughter" exposes the adaptive performances required to endure material lack. Reading through postclassical trauma theory, such scenes depict trauma as environmentally mediated: scarcity is not only a physiological deficit but a cultural atmosphere that organizes time, relations, and self-presentation (Balaev, 2012; Craps, 2013). Moreover, some scholars of structural violence help clarify why such injury persists. Farmer (2004) shows that routine of everyday deprivations, like food insecurity, are patterned outcomes of political and economic structures, not because of a simple individual failure. Similarly, Das (2007) argues that communities absorb these harms into the "ordinary," where survival depends on accepting what should be unbearable. Therefore, Kiara's hunger can be read as cultural trauma, since it has the elements of shared, repeated, and continually reproduced by forces larger than the household.

Precarity also reorganizes the moral economy of work, recasting "hustling" from deviance into a communal survival ethic. "Everybody on our block got some kind of hustle, some way of staying fed in a city that don't see us" (Mottley, 2022, p. 23), Kiara observes, translating marginal labor into a collective identity under civic erasure. Butler's (2004) account of precarious life illuminates the sentence's double movement: the city's failure to recognize certain lives as grievable or supportable produces vulnerability that in turn necessitates unprotected forms of work. Ethnographic studies of urban survival economies likewise show how informal labor arises where formal opportunity is systematically withdrawn, binding residents to stigmatized practices that nonetheless sustain households (Bourgois, 1995). In this sense, hustling in *Nightcrawling* is a socially distributed response to scarcity rather than a solitary moral failure; it records how trauma ramifies across blocks, compressing agency into a narrow corridor between exposure and endurance. The communal "we" of Kiara's sentence refuses the isolating grammar of individual blame, insisting that deprivation is structurally allocated and therefore collectively borne.

Speaking of generational neglect brings these dynamics into focus within the family, where the lack of care functions both as a result and a driving force of structural harm. In the case of Kiara, it is when she notes that

“Mama gone again. It’s me and Marcus left to figure out dinner, but Marcus don’t look at the fridge. He looks at his notebook, writing rhymes while the shelves stay empty” (Mottley, 2022, p. 41).

In this quotation, the empty refrigerator represents a double absence, in both physical nourishment and emotional care. Meanwhile, the adverb “again” signals that neglect is habitual rather than occasional. Postclassical trauma, as a theory, identifies this pattern as a form of communal wound, which is clear evidence that this theory is evident within this novel. It is clearly illustrated by how injury moves across generations when institutions fail, and children are forced to assume adult responsibilities (Craps, 2013). Moreover, social-scientific studies of “adultification” clarify how scarcity turns children into caregivers and providers, which in fact reshapes their normal developmental trajectories and redefines family roles (Burton, 2007). Hartman’s (1997) analysis of the afterlife of slavery further situates such private scenes within a longer history of racialized abandonment, where Black children’s labor of care is demanded in the vacuum left by carceral, economic, and civic dispossession. In Mottley’s novel, Kiara’s assumption of responsibility for Trevor is not only tender; it is the social labor that keeps a household from collapse, even as it deepens the inscription of neglect as cultural memory.

When looking at the economic struggles, generational neglect, and the passing down of pain, it becomes clear that they are closely intertwined and are, in fact, three sides of the same coin, with hunger being the one that can bring them to a head. Black markets spring up as people turn to them in a bid to feed themselves and their families, and are, in turn, characterized by their brutal and exposing nature and shame, as children often feel pushed to adulthood by their parents before their time. Recognized as “well-known and accepted”, this can normalize the round trip through a period of scarcity, makes difficult or impossible to confront the stories of pain they need to confront. Oakland isn’t just the background in this narrative, but in essence, it is designed to teach. Helping people slice up food, speak like locals, and do housework when there isn’t much to go around. Trauma isn’t something that happens suddenly, but grows over time into a permanent state. How communities choose to respond, the stories they tell, and the identities they get are also basically, inextricably linked. Thus, *Nightcrawling* shows that hunger, hustling, and neglect are connected, that every pain we endure is carried by both the people and the locations we live in and passed down until it becomes routine, which is regarded as the way life is supposed to be (Butler, 2004; Das, 2007; Farmer, 2004).

### ***Policing, incarceration, and communal harm***

*Nightcrawling* frames policing not as episodic law enforcement but as a diffuse regime that criminalizes place and circulates harm through neighborhoods. Kiara’s observation, “When the cops come, they don’t come for one of us, they come for all of us. Whole blocks get swept up like we guilty just for living here” (Mottley, 2022, p. 56), condenses the novel’s carceral geography into a grammar of collective exposure. The sentence relocates culpability from individual acts to residential belonging, rendering the address itself a mark of suspicion. Read through Postclassical Trauma Theory, this is trauma as a structural condition: fear and injury are distributed, endured even by those who have no direct contact with arrest but who live under its constant anticipation (Craps, 2013; Balaev, 2012). Alexander’s (2010) account of racialized criminalization clarifies how entire communities can be discursively aligned with crime, while Ritchie (2017) shows that such alignment bears distinct gendered consequences for Black women whose bodies and testimony are systematically devalued. The text thereby reveals a system in which policing is less an event than an atmosphere, saturating domestic interiors with the knowledge that safety cannot be presumed, only managed through vigilance and constraint.

This atmosphere is sustained by internalized surveillance and the constant self-monitoring shaped by the expectation of state oversight. Thus, the voices in the novel, like

neighbors listening, doors half-open, and footsteps, are collective in their nature and blend together, evoking Foucault's (1977) notions about disciplinary society. However, the situation in Oakland is different as the disciplinary gaze is both racialized and spatialized as it is fixed specifically on Black neighborhoods. Supporting this idea, Browne (2015) describes this condition as the surveillance of Blackness, where visibility itself becomes dangerous and everyday movement turns into an act of managing risk. What is equally important is that in *Nightcrawling*, the community creates and follows shared rules that are, in one way or another, imposed on them. For example, one of the rules is how to move when they are together and the type of conversation. To put it simply, they use them as protective routines and hard-earned strategies to navigate a world that treats Black presence as a threat to them. However, these routines reflect postclassical trauma's main focus on environmental mediation, which shows that trauma is not only remembered but acted out through habits and daily choices (Craps, 2013). Thus, they create a collective sense of caution that looks like a rhythm of sound and space through which residents try to avoid harm while keeping alive the awareness of danger that connects them.

Incarceration extends this choreography by removing bodies and redistributing grief. When Marcus is arrested, Kiara notes, "When Marcus went inside, the whole building went quiet. Like we all lost somebody at once" (Mottley, 2022, p. 92). The simile of death translates imprisonment into communal bereavement, where absence is experienced as a building-wide wound rather than a private sorrow. Comfort (2008) documents how families and partners "do time together," absorbing logistical burdens and emotional losses; Western and Pettit (2010) describe incarceration as a normalized life-course event in disadvantaged neighborhoods; and Wildeman and Western (2010) show how it produces cumulative disadvantage for children and kin. Placed alongside these findings, Mottley's scene reads as both ethnographically plausible and formally acute: the sudden quiet functions like a ritual cue, inaugurating a period of suspended life in which neighbors reorganize care, finances, and attention around a newly missing person. Within a postclassical frame, incarceration is not the endpoint of policing but the next station on a carceral continuum, the institutional technology by which communal injury is formalized and prolonged.

The section's focus on communal harm also clarifies how policing and imprisonment shape gendered experience even when scenes are not explicitly sexualized. Ritchie (2017) demonstrates that Black women face distinct vulnerabilities at the intersection of policing and poverty—exposure to coercion, disbelief of claims, and the conversion of survival strategies into grounds for punishment. In Mottley's Oakland, this gendered exposure is not limited to moments of assault; it threads through the anticipatory labor of care, the informal economies Kiara must enter to sustain her household, and the silences women share as a language of safety. The novel thereby extends the argument beyond "bad apples" or singular abuses to show a systemic fabric in which gender, race, and class co-produce persistent harm. By situating women's vulnerability within a neighborhood's carceral routine, *Nightcrawling* exemplifies a postclassical insight: trauma is cultural and relational, reproduced by institutions and learned as practice, not merely suffered as memory (Balaev, 2012; Craps, 2013; Alexander, 2010).

All in all, these scenes position *Nightcrawling* as a critique of police power as collective punishment that not only affects a single individual but a large group of people, making them live in incarceration as communal literal living death. Therefore, the novel's approach is both representational and analytical, tracking how sound, routine, and any other everyday routines are reshaped by the threat and aftermath of state violence. Thus, it reframes trauma from an individual psychological event into a shared experience of time, where the feelings of fear, loss, and vigilance move across both communities in current times and next generations. Moreover, this circulation forms the central focus of the current study within Postclassical Trauma Theory, as the processes that make harm feel ordinary and the rituals through which communities hold themselves together to make the so-called systems or power that render those

rituals necessary in the first place. Finally, Mottley's contribution is to give that circulation a local habitation or specific space, for example, Oakland's corridors, stairwells, and streets, where communal harm is both experienced and articulated into a turning lived experience by this community into literary testimony.

### ***Gendered dimensions of trauma***

*Nightcrawling* renders gendered harm as a structural condition that precedes and exceeds any single incident, aligning closely with Postclassical Trauma Theory's emphasis on culturally embedded injury. From Kiara's perspective, surveillance and commodification attach to her body before consent is even articulated, revealing how vulnerability is produced by social position rather than individual choice. The scene in which a man sizes her up makes the pre-consensual expropriation unmistakable:

He asks me what I got to give, and I know he don't mean no money. I feel his eyes on me, weighing my body like it's already his. I ain't even said yes, but my silence is enough (Mottley, 2022, p. 37).

The verbs "weighing" and the construction "already his" establish a prior claim or just a clear assertion of Kiara's body, where objectification or embodiment is translated into something close to a tradable currency. Moreover, intersectionality explains why this claim is attached to it so persistently, since the convergence of race, gender, and class organizes which bodies become read as available objects, and which silences are misinterpreted as consent (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2000). Furthermore, from a post-classical perspective, the scene suggests that trauma should not be understood simply as a psychological reaction that emerges after the event. Instead, it functions as an organized cultural pattern that imprints the vulnerability and exposure of Black women, presenting these conditions as if they were normal aspects of everyday life (Balaev, 2012; Craps, 2013). What is equally important, the affective economy here is not private; it is public and learned, where recognition, desire, and fear circulate through a social field that reads Black femininity as both hypervisible and unprotected (Sharpe, 2016).

The stakes of gendered vulnerability are unmistakably material, since the economic instability turns constant exposure into a forced survival economy. For example, when rent and hunger collide, Kiara explains the chain of cause and effect with devastating clarity as she states that

"When the landlord knocks, when the rent is due, when Trevor asks for food, I know what I have to do. I walk the streets at night, find men who pay enough to keep us inside another month" (Mottley, 2022, p. 67).

Furthermore, the conditional rhythm, like rent, hunger, and response, traces structural pressure and not free choice. In simple words, the Feminist and carceral scholars have shown that under any deprivation, the boundary between labor and coercion collapses, so that the body becomes the means through which the markets, landlords, and the state enforce control (Davis, 1981). Moreover, Ritchie (2017) demonstrates that systems of criminalization transform these survival strategies into reasons for punishment or disbelief, which subjects Black women to even greater surveillance when necessity intersects with stigma. However, in Mottley's Oakland, gender-related trauma does not emerge as a separate incident, but as a continuous daily state of endurance, manifested in working at night, speaking cautiously, and moving with calculation. Therefore, the body pays the price for maintaining the family's cohesion and survival.

In the novel, silence also appears as a kind of work that women do; it is not just the absence of speech, but a way to learn from them in order to stay safe and communicate at the same time. In other words, the women's calmness, mutual glances, unspoken details, and innuendos among them all act as a means of protection that identifies danger without provoking it. From a postclassical perspective, this becomes a traumatic cultural practice, as knowledge is transmitted among women as what a woman does in a time of danger, rather than as direct speech spoken out (Hirsch, 2008). Furthermore, this is also consistent with black feminist analyses of dominant stereotypes and the continued marginalization of Black women's voices, as speech often leads to disbelief or punishment. Therefore, silence may become a means of protection, as not speaking can keep them away from harm (Ritchie, 2017). However, the point here is not that silence heals the damage, because it is not, but rather that silence within the prison world depicted in the novel serves as a social means of reducing vulnerability, even if at the same time it maintains the same conditions that make speech dangerous (Sharpe, 2016). From a postclassical perspective, this is a vivid picture of culture shock, an inherited set of survival that binds women together through what cannot be safely spoken.

Finally, *Nightcrawling* shows that gender-related trauma does not remain transient but rather leaves a lasting mark on the body, until it becomes like an extended history that affects cognition, memory, and self-perception. In the final pages of the novel, Kiara views her skin as an archive, or “map” that preserves the trace of the accumulated damage and does not allow it to disappear (Mottley, 2022, p. 243). Therefore, postclassical trauma theory contributes to the reading of this effect as a cultural effect, not just an internal and individual psychological state, but rather a product of inherited institutions and norms, and not just marks that appear on the body of a single individual (Balaev, 2012; Craps, 2013). As Scarry (1985) states, when talking about how pain “makes and unmakes” the world, the image of the map here is important because the harm reshapes space and time in human life, and at the same time makes the body a witness to and evidence of this harm. However, when understood through analyses of black feminism and writings that discussed life after violence, the “map” also signifies a cultural outlook that devalues certain people, makes them constantly exposed, and makes it always unlikely to believe them (Collins, 2000; Sharpe, 2016). What is clear here is a situation governed by gender and race considerations and not just an individual wound, where exploitation is pre-present, silence is misinterpreted, and the continuation of life becomes a burden borne by the body itself. This is precisely what postclassical trauma theory shows and emphasizes.

## CONCLUSION

This study has argued that *Nightcrawling* reimagines trauma in decisively postclassical terms, relocating harm from an individual, event-based rupture to a cultural condition produced and sustained by structural forces. Building on the theoretical shift outlined in the Introduction and Review of Literature, and operationalized through a close-reading Methodology attentive to space, ritual, and embodiment, the analysis demonstrates how Mottley's Oakland renders trauma as environmentally mediated, communally shared, and historically sedimented. Rather than privileging flashback, belatedness, or unspeakability as master tropes, the novel maps how injury circulates through institutions—housing markets, policing regimes, carceral systems—and through the everyday practices by which communities endure them. This reframing does not deny psychic pain; it contextualizes it, showing that narrative form and urban form co-produce the meanings, habits, and atmospheres through which suffering becomes ordinary. As a result, *Nightcrawling* functions not only as testimony but as a diagnosis, transforming the city's corridors, thresholds, and bodies into an archive of collective experience.

Each primary section contributes a discrete vantage on this collective archive while reinforcing the same postclassical logic. Community Grief and Urban Displacement showed how mass evictions, destroyed homes, and funerals cause people to feel deeply connected to

one another in a shared sense of sorrow, making buildings more than just physical structures; they're a reminder of what's missing. *Shared Precarity: Hunger, Hustling and Generational Neglect* investigated how economic hardship dominates our lives and is used as a way of teaching, forcing people to come up against the harsh realities of scarcity, and causing people to turn to informal economies and premature care-giving, all the while, passing on the pain and scars to future generations. *Policing, Incarceration, and Community Harm* revealed the way in which the system takes over a neighborhood, turning it into an area where everyone is on edge, worried about being hurt, and doesn't always get over the shock of a loved one's death. The book also says that women, especially black women, bear the brunt of all these problems. When you take all these chapters together, *Nightcrawling* shows us that harm is a relationship thing, that it's the systems we have in place that cause the pain, and that we store this pain in buildings, hand it down through tradition and care, and write it all over people who don't have much protection.

The article's contribution is twofold. First, it offers a sustained postclassical reading of a contemporary Black urban novel, demonstrating how Mottley's narrative extends trauma studies beyond Eurocentric, event-centered frameworks and toward an account calibrated to structural violence, cultural memory, and communal survival. Thus, this intervention clarifies how literary form can register "slow" and distributed harms without relinquishing affective intensity or ethical urgency. Second, it delineates implications for trauma studies. Future work should (a) treat urban environment and civic infrastructure as media of trauma rather than as mere settings; (b) model analysis on communal repertoires of vigil, silence, and shared caregiving through which harm is both borne and resisted; and (c) center gendered exposure within carceral and economic logics, where vulnerability is produced by policy and misrecognized as choice. Methodologically, the approach highlights the value of thematically organized close reading that preserves narrative chronology while testing claims against established postclassical concepts. Conceptually, it encourages trauma scholarship to read contemporary texts like *Nightcrawling* as sites where collective injury is named and redistributed into cultural forms of endurance. In foregrounding Oakland's ordinary devastations and the extraordinary labor of survival, the novel, and this reading of it, press the field to theorize trauma where it most often resides, in the shared, the structural, and the everyday.

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