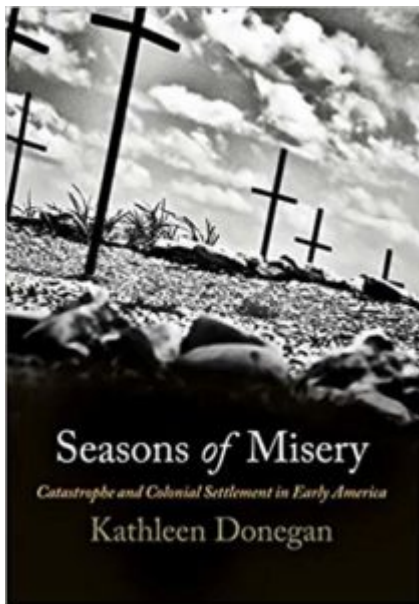


Trauma, Disability, and Colonial Unsettling



In her beautifully devastating book *Seasons of Misery*, Kathleen Donegan powerfully argues for the unsettling nature of colonial settlement in early America. Dwelling in moments of misery, she uses literary analysis, narrative history and trauma studies to defamiliarize received accounts—allowing us to attend to the narratives’ deep distress, to consider suffering and violence together, and to disrupt “critical analysis of early colonialism as a vehicle for national ideology.” In asking us to reimagine colonial settlement, *Seasons of Misery* is a tremendously fertile book, and I would like to use my time today to demonstrate how it opens up new critical possibilities—in particular, following my own interests, how we might use Donegan’s book to rethink disability and trauma in this early period.



Kathleen Donegan, *Seasons of Misery: Catastrophe and Colonial Settlement in Early America*

To do so, I want to turn to Donegan’s discussion of the Jamestown catastrophes and the narratives of its leaders John Smith and George Percy. Percy led the colony through a series of catastrophes—not just Native attacks and the Starving Time, but what Donegan refers to cumulatively as “the worst misery known in England’s early American settlements.” Thus, she writes that when Percy penned his “catastrophic history, the ‘ill and odious wound’ of Virginia was manifestly opened.” John Smith left before the worst. Glossing the differences between the two leaders’ accounts, Donegan explains: “If Smith writes history as autobiography, Percy writes history as abjection.”

Nevertheless, as she tells us, Smith did not leave Jamestown unaffected. On his way back from visiting unruly settlers upriver, a bag of gunpowder exploded in

Smith's lap. William Simons gives an account of the scene in Smith's *The Generall Historie of Virginia*: "Sleeping in his Boate ... accidentallie, one fired his powder-bag, which tore the flesh from his body and thighs, nine or ten inches square in a most pittifull manner; but to quench the tormenting fire, frying him in his cloaths he leaped over-board into the deepe river, where ere they could recover him he was neere drowned." Smith was forced to leave his post, traveling first back to Jamestown and then across the Atlantic with untreated, "grievous" wounds. Whether or not John Smith was "accidentallie" castrated necessarily remains a matter of speculation. What is almost certain, however, is that Smith bore the bodily marks of his time in the colony for the rest of his life.



Jamestown Cemetery. Courtesy of BillCannon.net.

This pair—Smith's body and Percy's narrative of the "'ill and odious wound' of Virginia"—provide an exciting opportunity to use Donegan's analysis to enrich our understanding of early America. Smith's body and Percy's narrative draw together trauma and impairment in the period of colonial settlement. In her comparison of Smith and Percy's accounts, Donegan writes: "To put Percy and Smith into relation is to recognize why catastrophe, as well as possibility, was foundational to early settlement writing." Holding the two together, what also grows clear is that John Smith told a story of "possible worlds" but also returned with his body disabled for some time, and marked for a lifetime, by the colonial encounter. The legacies of Percy's time in the colony were not corporeal but cognitive and narrative.

Through this pair, then, we might reenvision what scholars have registered as

the notoriously conflicted relationship between trauma studies and disability studies. As James Berger argues, although the two seemingly share much in terms of subject matter and character—both “concerned with devastating injury and its lasting effects” and with the “problematics of representation”—“connections between trauma studies and disability studies are nearly nonexistent.” “We could propose, facetiously,” Berger continues, “that disability studies is marked by an inability to mourn, and trauma studies by an inability to *stop* mourning,” but we should, after Berger, seek to reconcile the aims of the two fields and strengthen their “share[d] ... interest in reform, seen as a radical remaking of social structures, institutions, and norms.”

The problems are sizable because the fields’ strategies are often at odds. Metaphor, for example, is a key feature of trauma studies, and an infamous hobbyhorse for disability scholars. But other points of tension include: How do we reconcile trauma studies’ “posttraumatic, post-apocalyptic landscape of symptoms and signs,” to use Berger’s language, in which “all that preceded it and all that follows after now take meaning from that single moment,” with disability studies’ insistence on the “more mundane and anti-apocalyptic”?

It is here that Donegan’s argument about the centrality of catastrophe to colonial identity can help us propose new solutions. If, as Donegan writes, “English settlers became colonial through the acute bodily experiences and mental ruptures they experienced in their first years on Native American ground,” then lasting physical, mental, and narrative changes were common to the act of colonial settlement. In other words, Donegan allows us to see the settlers as a mentally and physically marked population. Her account makes room for both Smith’s body and Percy’s narrative, creating a space in which we might acknowledge trauma as a defining structure of colonial identity while also understanding the bodies and minds produced out of the colonial encounter to be myriad—or perhaps, to use Chris Mounsey’s term, *variable*.

Following Donegan, then, we might understand that since the act of settlement necessarily unsettled the bodies and minds of colonial subjects, it created a variable population—one in which altered physical, mental, and narrative forms represented the common states of settlers. As Donegan argues: “Representing the initiation of colonial life as a new world of misery allowed settlers to write from within the breach of a ruptured Englishness, to witness the wages of becoming colonial, to express their bewilderment, to justify their violence, and to claim the singularity of their experience all at once.” It is here, in the crucible of contact Donegan describes, that we might hold trauma and impairment together, seeing them as common and defining experiences of settlement in the British Atlantic.

Further reading:

For more on trauma and disability, see James Berger, “Trauma without disability, disability without trauma: A disciplinary divide,” *JAC* (2004): 563-82, and Daniel R. Morrison and Monica J. Casper, “Intersections of

Disability Studies and Critical Trauma Studies: A Provocation," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 32:2 (2012).

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