

Affective Memory, Trauma, And Identity In Gene Luen Yang's Superman Smashes The Klan

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Gene Luen Yang's *Superman Smashes the Klan* (2020) examines how affective memory—specifically unresolved emotional imprints of childhood discrimination—influence identity formation and perpetuate trauma. Drawing on Théodule Ribot's theorisation of affective memory, the study explores how Superman's recollections of fear, alienation, and otherness resurface through visions, hallucinations, and symbolic associations. The paper contends that the novel portrays affective memory as both a burden and a pathway toward transformation: while it perpetuates fear and alienation, it also enables reconciliation with the past and solidarity against xenophobia. By situating Superman's journey within broader discourses of trauma and immigrant identity, the novel becomes a cultural allegory of memory, healing, and resistance in the face of exclusion. This study sheds light on the interplay of emotional memory and identity in contemporary graphic narratives addressing racial and cultural marginalisation.

Keywords: Affective Memory, Trauma Studies, Identity, Xenophobia, Superhero.

Introduction

Memory constitutes a vital dimension of human cognition, serving as the connective tissue between past experience, present consciousness, and future possibilities. Within this framework, affective memory, defined as the capacity to recall past emotions and re-experience them in the present, has been central to psychology and trauma studies. Even when forgotten or repressed, emotional imprints persist in the unconscious, resurfacing unexpectedly and reshaping the individual's present reality. Such revivals, often triggered by external stimuli, can destabilise the sense of self and continuity, which underscores the importance of ongoing scholarly attention to the interplay between memory, emotion, and identity.

Théodule Armand Ribot in his work *The Psychology of the Emotions* (1896) conceptualises affective memory as a type of memory that involves recalling “the circumstances plus the revived condition of feeling” (153). He further differentiates between

“false or abstract memory of feelings” (160), which retains only the knowledge of an event’s emotional valence and “true or concrete memory of impressions” (162), which entails a vivid re-experiencing of the original emotion itself. He notes that, “the true or concrete memory of impressions consists in the actual reproduction of a former state of feeling, with all its characteristics.” (162). This distinction between abstract and concrete affective memory continues to inform contemporary understandings of how past traumas are reanimated in the present.

This concept of affective memory extends naturally to trauma studies, because memory itself can operate as a site of ongoing psychological impact. Freud and Breuer, in *Studies in Hysteria* (1895), argue that trauma does not lie in the original event itself but in its remembrance. In this view, the memory of the event, rather than the event itself, operates as a continuing cause of suffering, surfacing years later when triggered by a contemporary experience. They note that hysterics “suffer mainly from reminiscences,” as recollections of past pain can provoke fresh psychological and even physical responses long after the initial event (qtd. in Balaev 361). Reflecting on their view, literary scholar Balaev, in her essay “Trauma Studies,” further observes that such “pathogenic reminiscences” reveal how traumatic memory simultaneously reopens psychological wounds while also granting significance to previously repressed experiences (361).

Building on this framework, the present study explores how true affective memory functions within Gene Luen Yang’s graphic novel *Superman Smashes the Klan* (2020). The narrative follows Roberta Lee and her Chinese American family as they confront racial hostility from the Ku Klux Klan in Metropolis. It also focuses on Clark Kent (Superman) as he combats the same racial violence while negotiating his own sense of alien otherness. The novel depicts how discrimination faced by Superman during childhood leaves emotional imprints that resurface involuntarily, perpetuating trauma and shaping identity. Scholarship on trauma and memory in visual narratives provides a critical context for this analysis. Michael Rothberg’s *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (2000), emphasises that representations of trauma engage not only with historical events but also with the persistence of affect, identity, and memory. Rothberg observes that “exploring the recent fascination with the Holocaust means exploring a more general contemporary fascination with trauma, catastrophe, the fragility of memory, and the persistence of ethnic identity” (3). This perspective is particularly relevant to *Superman Smashes the Klan*, as it highlights how early experiences of marginalisation and prejudice leave lasting psychological and emotional effects. The narrative demonstrates how discrimination becomes embedded in memory, influencing the development of self and the navigation of identity in a world shaped by hostility and exclusion.

By integrating Ribot’s theorisation of affective memory with trauma studies, this paper examines how *Superman Smashes the Klan* portrays the revival of past emotions as an embodied form of trauma that complicates individual identity. The study positions Yang’s narrative as a significant cultural text that reveals how discriminatory experiences produce lingering affective imprints that hinder self-realisation. Ultimately, it argues that affective memory functions both as a site of trauma and as a pathway for confronting and reconfiguring identity in the face of marginalisation.

As Ribot observes, “Personal unconsciousness [is] a residuum of affective states connected with anterior perceptions, or with events of our life” (176). In other words, personal unconsciousness contains leftover emotions from past experiences that continue to influence the present thoughts, feelings, and behaviour, even if we are not consciously aware of them. Ribot adds that these emotions can reappear, but they are often projected or transferred onto unrelated people or situation, which he terms as “transference of feelings” (176). He distinguishes two forms of this transference: transference by contiguity, where feelings associated with an event are transferred to a closely related object (177), and transference by resemblance, where a past emotion resurfaces in response to a similar or analogous present experience (178).

In *Superman Smashes the Klan*, transference by resemblance is evident when Superman encounters kryptonite. The green crystal emits a strange, familiar odour that weakens him. He reflects, “Like ash and rot and...something else. Something so familiar it brings tears to my eyes” (11). When he touches it, his hands appear green, prompting him to instinctively hide them (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Superman hides his hand in fear after seeing it turn green (12 & 13)

Significantly, no one else can see his green hands, which indicates that this unsettling experience occurs within his consciousness, almost as a hallucination. Even in his ordinary life as Clark Kent, the hallucination persists as he envisions himself as a green-skinned alien with horns and red eyes in the mirror (fig. 2). These hallucinations accompanied with profuse anxiety suggest deeper psychological undercurrents, hinting at unresolved emotional conflicts.



Fig. 2. Clark Kent's hallucination of alien self (20)

This trauma intensifies when Superman experiences visions of his alien parents, who resemble the green alien from his mirror vision. When these figures speak in an unfamiliar language, they reawaken his earliest memories of the phonograph-like device that accompanied his arrival on Earth. This object, with its strange and indecipherable voices, operates as a symbolic repository of suppressed origins, encapsulating both his alien heritage and the fear of exposure. The resurfacing of these sounds exemplifies Ribot's notion of affective memory, where repressed emotions are reactivated by associative triggers. The trauma deepens when he recalls overhearing a fragment of his parents' conversation about his origins: "That rocket ship he came in... I can guarantee it didn't come across an ocean. It came from—" (39). Although the sentence is unfinished, young Clark comprehends that he is not from Earth, which marks his early moment of fear and profound isolation. In this way, Yang dramatises Ribot's distinction between abstract and concrete affective memory: Clark does not merely remember he is different but vividly re-experiences the fear and alienation bound to that realisation whenever analogous stimuli resurface.

Superman also experiences transference by contiguity when he meets Roberta, a Chinese American girl whose family suffers Klan attacks. Her statement, "I always kind of suspected that I don't belong. . . Last night, we got proof" (52), immediately resonates with Clark, triggering his own buried memories of alienation. As a young boy, Clark and his friend were reading pulp magazines when they were attacked by bullies. At that moment, the strange voices from the phonograph-like device resurfaced, a sound only he could hear, causing his eyes to glow red as he involuntarily levitated, emitting red energy rays (fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Young Superman's first involuntary display of powers (54)

The bullies fled in terror, and even his friend, whom he had saved, looked upon him with fear before running away. This moment leaves a deep emotional scar, intensifying his awareness of difference and rejection. It resonates with Roberta's confession of exclusion, as he admits, "I, too, always kind of suspected that I didn't belong. . . That day, I got proof" (55). His disclosure reveals how early rejection becomes a defining moment in his identity crisis.

The image of the green alien with horns and glowing eyes on the fallen pulp magazine cover (fig. 4) anticipates the distorted figures in his later hallucinations—both his monstrous reflection in the mirror and the apparitions of his parents (fig. 5). These recurring associations symbolically link past and present through analogical repetition, exemplifying Ribot's principle that affective memory persists through such triggers. In doing so, Yang underscores how unresolved traumatic experiences continue to resurface, reinforcing the long-term psychological consequences of childhood rejection.



Fig. 4. Magazine cover depicting a green alien (55)



Fig. 5. Apparitions of Superman's parents (38)

Superman's unresolved trauma also explains his persistent suppression of his alien powers, rooted in his fear of being perceived as monstrous. When Tommy, Roberta's brother, is kidnapped and thrown into the river, Superman, urged by the vision of his parents, uses his x-ray vision to locate Tommy and rescues him. However, when instructed to "Take a look at his bone" (87), he hesitates, holding back from fully embracing his abilities. Although the visions claim to be his parents, he resists the connection, declaring, "I – I don't look a thing like you!" (93). His fear to acknowledge his origins reflects his deep-seated anxiety about difference and rejection. The trauma is again traced back to his childhood: after frightening bullies with his powers, he was vilified by their parents, accused of being "demon possessed" (93) and condemned for "levitation" (94). This episode, compounded by overhearing his adoptive parents' anxiety over his identity as "an alien" (98) and their resolution to "raise him to be the

most perfectly ordinary boy in all of Smallville” (98), has profoundly shaped his desperate desire for normalcy. In response, he discarded the phonograph device carrying his parents’ voices, pleading, “Let me be ordinary. Perfectly ordinary” (100). Although Clark externally adopted this facade of normalcy, the persistence of these memories in adulthood shows how deeply trauma remains embedded in affective memory. As the researcher Craig Steel observes, hallucinations often result from repressed traumatic memories intruding into consciousness, tethered to the original wound (1–4). Superman’s repeated encounters with his distorted parental figures thus function less as reassurances and more as traumatic reminders, underscoring Ribot’s insight that affective memory preserves not only past emotions but also their destabilising force.

In accordance with the American Psychiatric Association, post-traumatic states are further characterised by “re-experiencing symptoms” such as “[r]ecurrent, involuntary, and intrusive distressing memories” and “dissociative reactions (e.g., flashbacks)” (qtd. in Jović and Varvin 13–14). In Superman’s case, visions repeatedly draw him back into childhood flashbacks, collapsing the boundary between past and present. As psychoanalysts Jović and Varvin note, trauma also collapses the ego’s ability to distinguish between automatic anxiety (responses to real danger) and signal anxiety (protective warnings against potential threats), leaving the subject overwhelmed (14). They also cite clinical psychologist Caroline Garland’s notion that trauma erodes “the capacity for symbolic thinking,” such that neutral cues—“smells, sounds, sights, situations, even words”—can provoke immense anxiety and flashbacks (14). This collapse of symbolic mediation is evident in Superman’s fearful reaction whenever his parents appear before him. Their appearance, though symbolic, registers for him as a direct threat, illustrating how trauma plunges the subject into the immediacy of fear.

The acuteness of his trauma is highlighted when the visions ask him, “Why only be half of who you actually are?” (125), which instantly triggers his memories of being bullied as “demon-boy” (125). As his anger resurfaced, young Clark once again heard the strange voices and felt his eyes glow. Overwhelmed, he covered his ears and cried out, “Why are you doing this to me again?! I threw you away” (127), forcibly suppressing the manifestation. His subsequent insistence, “I was finally an ordinary boy” (128), underscores his desperate attachment to the illusion of normalcy, even at the cost of disavowing his true identity.

In the present, Superman continues this denial, pleading with the visions of his biological parents not to appear before him: “I’ve finally created a life for myself where no one looks at me in fear. No one who isn’t committing a crime, anyway. Please don’t ruin that for me” (129). This yearning for an ‘ordinary’ existence becomes problematic when his repression impairs his powers. During a Klan attack on the Unity House, he is unable to fully use his abilities, and later, when the Daily Planet is attacked, he climbs rather than flies, failing to prevent the kidnapping of Perry and Lois Lane. Superman’s suppression of powers mirrors the condition described by the researcher Katie Reginato Cascamo, who argues that trauma “rewires the brain to focus only on survival.” Thus, Superman’s desire to protect a carefully constructed life free from discrimination reflects this survival-driven mindset, even though it compromises his ability to embrace his full identity.

Ultimately, Roberta confronts him with the consequences of repression, warning that his “holding back actually endangers people!” (183). This compels Superman to face his trauma directly. He meets his adoptive parents, who reassure him that nothing will change their

bond, and then retrieves the phonograph device he once discarded. Cascamo's notion that healing from trauma requires "restoring a sense of safety" resonates here, as the affirmation of unconditional belonging provides Superman with the emotional grounding necessary to revisit his past. When he reenounters his biological parents through the device's memory projection, they no longer appear as monstrous green figures but as ordinary humans clad in clothing resembling his own (fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Superman encounters his real parents through memory projection (188)

This moment reveals the reality of his biological parents, correcting his prior hallucinated perception of them as monstrous aliens, and enables him to reconcile with his identity and heritage.

By integrating this acceptance, Superman embraces his full identity. He publicly reveals himself while saving Roberta from Matthew Riggs, unburdened by suppression. Even when others respond with fear, he finds solace in Lois's positive reaction; he reflects, "I knew Lois could never be afraid of me, even after she learned the truth. That's why I fell in love with her" (212). Allies like Roberta further empower him, enabling him to confront Riggs and overcome his fear of discrimination. His declaration to Riggs that, "We are bound together by the future. We all share the same tomorrow" (213), marks a decisive moment of resilience and solidarity. This reaffirms Cascamo's insight that survivors are able to engage in relational healing—through friendships, intimate relationships, and community connections—only after they have achieved a basic sense of safety and security. Superman's journey illustrates how

emotional security facilitates both trauma recovery and embrace of an integrated, authentic self.

Yang's narrative techniques further reinforce this thematic arc of trauma and memory. The researcher Murazanova identifies literary techniques such as "fragmentation, syntax disruption, ellipses, text/image layout, repetitions, symbols, photograph insertion and assimilation, intertexts, framing of panels, and so on" to represent trauma (qtd. in Jena and Samantray 4). In *Superman Smashes the Klan*, fragmentation appears in Superman's childhood memories of discrimination, which resurface as disjointed flashes rather than coherent narratives, mirroring the intrusive quality of traumatic recall. Repetition occurs through the recurring visions of his parents, emphasising the inescapability of trauma. Symbols such as the distorted parental figure and the discarded phonograph embody the lingering effects of repression and fear. Intertextuality also plays a key role, as Yang reimagines the 1940s Superman radio serial to highlight immigrant anxieties and racial violence in a contemporary register. Collectively, these techniques demonstrate how the novel adapts the visual and narrative language of comics to demonstrate how trauma persists and resurfaces within Superman's struggle for identity.

Gene Luen Yang's *Superman Smashes the Klan* thus demonstrates how affective memory functions as both a burden of trauma and a catalyst for identity formation. The narrative illustrates how unresolved emotions persist in Superman's unconscious, resurfacing in moments of crisis through visions, hallucinations, and symbolic associations. These memories reveal the enduring psychological consequences of discrimination and othering, showing that even a figure as powerful as Superman is not immune to the destabilising effects of trauma. By weaving together visual fragmentation, symbolic imagery, and affective memory, Yang crafts a narrative that not only represents trauma but also critiques xenophobia and the longing for assimilation. Ultimately, *Superman Smashes the Klan* situates trauma as both an individual and collective struggle, showing that healing requires confronting painful memories, reclaiming one's origins, and building solidarity across difference. In this way, Superman's story moves beyond the conventions of the superhero genre, offering a critical allegory of trauma, identity, and belonging in the face of systemic exclusion.

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