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## 7

## Problems in Representing Trauma

**Marinella Rodi-Risberg**

Research on traumatic experience addresses the limits and possibilities of testimony in an age of violence, abuse, genocide, torture, war, and terror and raises issues of how trauma can or cannot be represented. The way trauma is conceptualized and understood, and the meaning attributed to it, poses difficult problems to its representation. This chapter highlights some of the inherent tensions or unresolved issues within trauma studies, particularly as they relate to literature and literary representation. Questions such as how, what kind of, and whose trauma is depicted by whom and for whom problematize representation in terms of which texts are identified as trauma texts and which are not, which experiences or events are identified as traumatic and which are not, who is identified as victim, who as perpetrator, and by whom, and who benefits and who do not from these understandings. Ultimately, as this chapter will show, these issues have ethical as well as political implications.

In Cathy Caruth's famous definition, trauma causes an epistemological crisis and bypasses linguistic reference and is thus paradoxically only experienced belatedly through representation in the form of traumatic effects, which are seen to literally represent the traumatic event. Therefore, literature becomes a privileged site for bearing witness to trauma through innovative literary forms that mimic and transmit rather than represent the phenomenon to

readers in its literality. Thus, history is accessible only as trauma: “For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence” (1996: 18). This belated reaction gives rise to the construction of history so that “history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (24).

In the twenty-first century, this Caruthian understanding has been questioned on account of the way it depoliticizes and universalizes traumatic experience. For instance, Dominick LaCapra has issued a word of caution in relation to claims made by Caruth concerning the tension between what he calls historical and structural trauma (notions connected to Caruth’s event-based model), the former being specific events (such as the Nazi Holocaust) with particular victims, whereas the latter is “an anxiety-producing condition of possibility” (2001: 82) to which all can fall victim. Conflating absence and loss or conflating transhistorical and historical trauma not only risks universalizing psychic pain but also downplaying the importance of specific historical problems: it may mean that “the significance or force of particular historical losses (for example, those of apartheid or the Shoah) may be obfuscated or rashly generalized. As a consequence one encounters the dubious ideas that everyone (including perpetrators or collaborators) is a victim, that all history is trauma, or that we all share a pathological public sphere or a ‘wound culture’” (64).

James Berger traces the notion of structural trauma to Freud’s work in *Moses and Monotheism*, which he says allows us to see any historical trauma as

the recapitulation of a phylogenetic Ur-trauma that can have the effect of undermining the meaning and importance of the actual experienced trauma (1997: 570). In other words, if every historical trauma is seen through the prism of structural trauma, misrepresented as it were, (mis)understood in relation to repressed memories of an earlier catastrophe, then each traumatic event may lose its specificity.

Furthermore, the border between structural and historical or event-based traumas has recently been challenged for its Western bias, especially by postcolonial critics, as (post)colonial experiences include daily and routine exposure to oppression and racism (see, e.g., Craps 2013). Alan Gibbs wonders if LaCapra's concept of absence is ideological and may possibly conceal causes of trauma, including "political and economic structures of oppression": If so, there is the danger of "anaesthetising concrete historical loss by transforming it into something entirely illusory, that may be concealed underneath the ideological construction of an allegedly universal human experience labelled 'absence'" (2014: 205).

While LaCapra emphasizes the dangers of transforming absence into loss, the idea of absence as originating in a historical hiatus stems from a claim that trauma exists in an ahistorical and apolitical realm. Consequently, as Gibbs notes, LaCapra's caution may involve the conversion of an actual historical trauma or loss into a structural one rather than the conflation of loss and absence: "the conflation of absence and loss ... may be comprehended as one method through which victims begin to process their trauma, by de-actualising, universalising, and thus humanising and diminishing their condition's exceptional and

overwhelming status” (2014: 206). Also, the reverse, or what LaCapra refers to as converting absence into loss can instead be the reconstruction of “more recondite and elusive (and maybe even illusory) loss into one which becomes recuperable through the addition of identifiable causes” (206). This suggests, for instance, that a specific group may be blamed for losses that did not take place in actuality.

In the 1990s, Caruth’s model offered an interdisciplinary approach to the trauma concept, incorporating psychoanalysis, literature, and philosophy, at a time when the fields of the humanities and psychiatry came together in investigations into trauma and the Holocaust, thus providing a possibility for integrating poststructuralist theory and real traumatic events and their political, cultural, sociohistorical, and ethical meanings. Yet, as Wulf Kansteiner points out, “once that important task had been accomplished the continued claims about the ubiquity of cultural trauma have quickly turned into unintended gestures of disrespect toward today’s victims of extreme violence” (2004: 213). This is because what Kansteiner calls “the cultural trauma metaphor” (2004) unsuccessfully unites two different research traditions on trauma – philosophical texts on the Holocaust and the limits of representation, and psychological research on real trauma victims. This, he claims, has led to an elimination of the historical precision and social pertinence that the concept of trauma initially helped to create, thus resulting in an aestheticization of violence that elides the difference between actual trauma and its representation and between victims, perpetrators, and spectators, rather than offer insight into the sociocultural consequences of historical trauma.

If all are traumatized – victims, perpetrators, and spectators alike – trauma no longer constitutes a ground for differentiation, and so how is it possible to discuss other people’s trauma? The ethics of representing the traumatic experience of others is another related critical problem for literary trauma theory. Who speaks for the traumatized? Or, in Colin Davis’s words, “Who should speak for those who do not speak for themselves, the dead, the mute, the traumatized, those who cannot or will not tell their own stories, or those who have no story to tell?” (2011: 19). What is an ethical way to depict that trauma? While discussing the trauma of others is what Davis calls an “ethical minefield,” the opposite, or “not to speak for those who have been silenced, not to recall or to study what happened to them in the hope of learning something from their stories,” would in and of itself “be an act of barbarity ..., hideously complicit with the forces which sought to eliminate them” (19).

According to the basic tenets of trauma studies, testimony to trauma is impossible without a situation of witnessing. In Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992), Laub insists that “the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event” (1992, 57), and Felman relates how her famous graduate seminar class, involving reading literary texts and the watching of videotaped testimonial interviews from the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimony at Yale collection, “broke out into a crisis” (47). After conferring with Laub she decided she needed to bring them “back into significance” (50), and worked through the crisis by interpreting the students’ reactions.

For LaCapra, affective engagement when reading/watching testimonies requires careful maneuvering between sympathy and distance to avoid overidentification, and he rightly voices concerns about Felman's approach: "One may question whether taking up an authoritative role that brings students 'back into significance' is tantamount to working through problems," and "one may also raise doubts about an academic's tendency to identify with a therapist in intimate contact with traumatized people as well as about the identification of a class with trauma victims and survivors – tendencies that may induce the reader's identification with one or the other subject position" (2001: 101–102). For Davis, "witnessing the other's trauma is precisely *not* to share it," but "to regard the other's pain as something alien, unfathomable, and as an outrage which should be stopped" (2011: 30): in a literary context, what readers can do is "to try to attend as honourably as possible to the traces of that which remains foreign to us" (40). The challenge, therefore, is to navigate between distance and sensitivity to avoid the appropriation of the trauma of others.

To address this problem, LaCapra distinguishes between two forms of historiography, which he labels "positivism" and "radical constructivism" and which he finds equally insufficient for the job of representing trauma (2001: 1). Instead, he argues for finding a narrative "middle voice" for the historian, who he sees as a "secondary witness," to bridge gaps they leave and (equally important) an attitude of "empathic unsettlement" in shaping that narrative. "Empathic unsettlement" describes the process of texts facilitating a feel for traumatic experiences by working through, putting readers/viewers in an empathic mode that entails critical distance (78). Even empathic unsettlement may sometimes

lead to “secondary trauma” for interviewers and commentators who work with survivors, but for LaCapra it would be an exaggeration to say that all who find themselves at least one remove from an encounter with trauma experience it (102).

Yet, empathic unsettlement presupposes the transmissibility of trauma in its literality, and the notion of its transmissibility is also disputed. Kansteiner, who rejects secondary trauma, indicates that there is an unexplored area between the experience of trauma and its representation, or “between trauma and entertainment” (2004: 195). Thus, the notion of transmissibility, or saying that trauma texts simulate the traumatic experience is, as Gibbs notes, “deeply problematic” because the affect performed by such texts transmitted to readers is contingent on context and the readers’ disposition (2014: 28), which means that sensitive readers are not a given.

“No ‘we’ should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people’s pain,” Susan Sontag establishes (2003: 7). Although Laub’s claim about the listener becoming a participant and co-owner of the trauma may be psychologically valid in a clinical situation where psychiatrists listen to their patients’ traumas, Martin Modlinger and Philipp Sonntag, in referring to Sontag’s conclusion, draw attention to the way that it is ethically problematic if indiscriminately transposed to a context of literary and cultural criticism because “the narratives of trauma that ‘we’ are being offered about other people’s pain in literature, film, photography and art are, in the overwhelming number of cases, not the same ones that psychologists and psychotherapists are dealing with in their treatment of real victims and witnesses” (2011: 8).



Although art “can navigate brilliantly the territories of trauma,” “it should be careful not to succumb to voyeuristic and arrogant spectatorship”: Instead of offering understanding, they suggest, literature may provide “a perspective on that which ‘we’ have not experienced” (9). This means that while ‘we’ cannot understand that which ‘we’ have not experienced, art can offer sensitive readers a unique view of other people’s suffering.

To avoid the risk of trauma studies turning readers and viewers into voyeurs and arrogant or commiserate spectators and appropriators of other people’s traumas, it is important to recognize the need to critically analyze the ethical and political implications of the position of trauma studies within the humanities. Susannah Radstone emphasizes trauma studies as a form of “tertiary witnessing” – through arts, literature, film, and historiography – and of examining the perils of inferiorizing primary trauma victims by constructing them as “helpless” from the perspective of LaCapra’s secondary witness (2011: 64, 63). Radstone stresses that “a focus on texts of catastrophe and suffering is bound to be inflected, also, by less easily acknowledgeable fascinations and fantasies concerning victimhood grounded in aggressivity, or a drive to voyeurism and control” as well as “masochistic identification with victimhood” (84, 85). Here trauma studies’ reading of Freud in the versions offered by Caruth, Felman, and Laub differ from contemporary psychoanalytic theories in solely focusing on the conscious mind and eschewing unconscious conflicts and identification with the perpetrator, or in replacing intrapsychical “unconscious processes of repression” with dissociation and “the inter-subjective” through witnessing (80). The implication is that such intrapsychic and unconscious

meaning-shaping processes, highlighted in alternate psychoanalytic understandings of trauma and memory, are replaced in Caruthian, Felmanian, and Laubian trauma studies with the witness/listener–testifier relationship that also defines the meaning of trauma.

Not all trauma victims are constructed equally, and if trauma studies will continuously deploy the concept of witnessing to account for its practices then it might ask itself whose stories are not being empathized with and witnessed. Trauma critics act as gatekeepers at the border of what is acknowledged as trauma and thus determine “for whom, when, where and in what circumstances are particular texts read or experienced as trauma texts” and “which events, experiences and texts are to be classed as traumatic and which are to be excluded from this category” (Radstone 2011: 85). The pain of those that are classified in the West as “other” are often ignored by trauma theory, which consequently makes it, as Radstone claims, “a theory that supports politicized constructions of those with whom identifications via traumatic sufferings can be forged and those from whom such identifications are withheld” (86). As trauma scholars we are *not* “helpless spectators/witnesses” because “the theories and approaches that we mobilize are implicated *in* politics and the mobilization of power”; therefore, “the concept of witnessing to describe [trauma studies’] *own* practices ... might best be deployed in the interests of developing a critical trauma studies sustained by an awareness of both ambiguity and the inevitability of ethical impurity” (88). Radstone’s critique emphasizes that trauma theory cannot claim ethical purity because it is necessarily inflected by politics as well as by psychological processes.

Feminist and postcolonial critics sometimes refuse the concept of empathy altogether because of “its assumed basis in ‘universal human emotions,’” which may represent yet another instance of inflicting Western values on other cultures (Vickroy 2015: 17). Laurie Vickroy emphasizes the importance of readers recognizing the parts they play in systems of power and their internalization of these systems’ ideologies, and strives “to create public awareness in the hope that it might reduce people’s complicity in these ideologies” (xii).

Another thorny question is the extent to which an individual model of trauma can or cannot be translated into a social or collective model. Collective memory is more complex than simply an extension of individual memory and collective trauma is more about politics than about psychology. A primary purpose of recalling the past through a model of collective memory is the self-image of a specific group in the present. What is termed collective memory is not so much about memory as about a story of shared social suffering agreed on by a specific social group and accepted by an audience: collective memory is, as Sontag indicates, “a stipulating: that *this* is important, and this is the story about how it happened” (2003: 86).

What does it mean to talk about group trauma, and how does this differ from individual trauma? Although it is possible to discern on a societal level certain processes that may equal those on an individual level, including repression, denial, and screen memories, the effects of such processes are different. Whereas the emotional experience of individual suffering drives the actual cultural construction of collective trauma, it is not fundamental, nor is

repression, denial, and working through as in individual psychology (Alexander 2012: 3). It is, Jeffrey Alexander notes, “the threat to collective rather than individual identity that defines the suffering at stake” (2). According to his social theory of trauma, “Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (6). Thus, in contrast to theories of individual trauma, events acquire traumatic status “because these phenomena are believed to have abruptly, and harmfully, affected collective identity,” and “not because of their actual harmfulness or their objective abruptness” (14).

Collective traumas are socially and culturally constructed in the sense that events are not intrinsically traumatic. A dreadful event may have taken place, but its representation is a matter of construction, or what Alexander calls a “trauma process,” “subject to whirling spirals of signification, fierce power contests, simplifying binaries, subtle stories, fickle audiences, and counter-narrations” (2012: 1, 98). Social suffering may be caused by war, genocide, violence, racial, ethnic, religious, and economic conflicts; the trauma process answers the questions regarding who caused the pain to whom, and responds to issues of moral responsibility, punishment, compensation, repair, and measures taken to prevent it from reoccurring. As a collective process devoted to collective memory and meaning-making, the trauma process fills the gap between what has occurred and its representation. At issue is the stability of the collectivity’s identity “in terms of meaning”: “It is the challenge to meaning that provides the

sense of shock and fear, not the events themselves” (15). Collective trauma narratives are created by authors and other artists, intellectuals, politicians, and leaders for social movements, and they rely on the development of powerful symbols as well as demographics and material resources, “which affect, even if they do not determine, what can be heard and who might listen” (3). Thus, the trauma process is similar to “performative speech acts” (16), and the collective trauma narrative that wins out in the struggle for symbolic control simply exhibits more performative power. The result is that the members of the group are convinced that they have been traumatized by a specific event and how it happened.

How does a collective model of trauma impact questions of memory, representation, and healing? One answer is that the transformation of individual suffering into collective trauma relies on ritual, political action, and different forms of storytelling (Alexander 2012: 3–4). If received by readers as media of cultural memory and if widely read, literary works can have transformational power: “Representations of historical events ... and characters ..., of myths and imagined memories *can* have an impact on readers and *can* re-enter, via mimesis, the world of action, shaping, for example, perception, knowledge and everyday communication, leading to political action – or prefiguring further representation” (Erlil 2011: 155). Consequently, literature may not only transform readers’ perception of reality but also reality itself through readers’ actions.

As an effective metaphor, cultural trauma may call attention to hitherto unrecognized suffering of a specific social or cultural group. Although social

suffering cannot be avoided, shedding light on the sociocultural structures and processes through a social theory of trauma may allow for a space where victims, spectators, and perpetrators can achieve the necessary critical distance to avert the most atrocious consequences (Alexander 2012: 5). Collective memory also involves what is chosen to be forgotten by social groups. Some social suffering may not achieve the status of collective trauma and so will have no audience outside the group, no redress, repair, or healing. Again, one cannot take a “we” for granted. Sometimes social groups extend the idea of a “we,” but in a similar way they can also deny other groups’ trauma or deny responsibility and project it elsewhere (6). Thus, trauma narratives, “[p]rojected as ideologies that create new ideal interests,” are two edged: they have the potential to “trigger significant repairs in the civil fabric” or “instigate new rounds of social suffering” (2).

Scholars have increasingly emphasized how the political integration of the Holocaust in the United States downplays America’s own violent history. The Holocaust Memorial Museum in the United States not only exemplifies an instance of memorialization of atrocity but also indirectly calls attention to a refusal to recognize trauma that may be felt to be too close to home. As Sontag notes, it is “about what didn’t happen in America, so the memory-work doesn’t risk arousing an embittered domestic population against authority. To have a museum chronicling the great crime that was African slavery in the United States of America would be to acknowledge that the evil was *here*” (2003: 88). Ana Douglass and Thomas Vogler suggest that the assimilation of the Jewish Holocaust into American culture may function as a “screen memory” for the killing of Native Americans “through which the nation is struggling to find a

proper mode of memorializing traumata closer to home” (2003: 53). Anne Rothe, for her part, explains that “to minimize America’s own past and present crimes” the United States is cast “as Nazi evil’s innocent Other” (2011: 11), yet “establishing the Holocaust as the ultimate embodiment of evil is unethical in itself because it minimizes all other instances and forms of oppression, victimization, and atrocity” (14).

This raises issues of perpetrator trauma, a neglected area of literary trauma studies. Literary trauma criticism has so far mostly paid attention to identification with victims and focused much less on perpetrator trauma. For Gibbs, this has to do with the amalgamation of PTSD and Caruthian trauma theory, which creates problems as regards the ethical aspects of trauma: The former originates in activists’ struggles on behalf of Vietnam War veterans and therefore to a great extent attends to perpetrator trauma, while the latter is partly rooted in Holocaust studies, where a disinclination to support or tolerate perpetrator trauma is expected (2014: 19). Historians, however, must consider transference, or the implication of themselves in relation to their object of study, to avoid reproducing the conditions they investigate. For LaCapra, absolute objectification or placing oneself wholly on the outside of a specific event means denying transference: as Stef Craps notes, this “repeats the kind of thinking that allowed the Nazis to dehumanize the Jews and do what they did in the first place” (Craps et al. 2015: 916).

Michael Rothberg aptly criticizes the elision of “the category of ‘victim’ with that of the traumatized subject” in trauma studies, which has resulted in the marginalized position of perpetrator trauma texts (2009: 90). Being traumatized

does not automatically imply being a victim as is the case with combat soldiers. In addition, there are also nontraumatized victims, “either because the victimization did not produce the kind of disruption that trauma ought to signify in order to have conceptual purchase, or because the victim has been murdered” (90). Scholars have also recently suggested that the categories of victim and perpetrator are not easily distinguishable in trauma narratives (Gibbs 2014: 167; Vickroy 2015: 30). Rothe has also found that victimhood has been equated with suffering in the trauma paradigm, but indicates that “[w]hile all victims suffer, not everyone who suffers is a victim, because some forms of suffering are not the result of victimization,” and that “the concept of victimhood requires that there be a perpetrator” (2011: 25). Thus, one may be traumatized and suffer without being a victim, i.e., without there being a human agency directly responsible for the victimization, such as in cases of illness or natural disasters.

Examining the ethical and political implications of trauma studies’ position and practices also includes addressing issues of complicity in the construction of victims. Focusing on perpetrators does not downplay the importance of engaging with victims. Craps emphasizes that calling attention to representations of perpetrators does not mean exculpation, but usefully points out that “we effectively deny our own complicity in violent histories and our own capacity for evil” when “we only ever identify with victims” (Craps et al. 2015: 916). Complicity is also taken up by Gibbs, who suggests that perpetrator trauma is connected with the idea of agency, or specifically “the denial of agency” to avoid responsibility, and that trauma studies “needs to address its potential complicity in the manufacturing of a sense of victimhood” in its depoliticizing



tendencies in the sense of diverting attention from the oppressive contexts that cause trauma and downplaying the trauma sufferer's agency and responsibility (2014: 247). Because perpetrators, according to trauma theory, do not suffer from trauma, trauma theory itself, as Gibbs indicates, is "implicated in post-9/11 events," allowing "the reconfiguration of the traumatised US body politic as absolute victim" (2014: 243). The U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrate that the transformation of "vicarious suffering" or "a sense of collective victimhood" may also be mobilized to offer "spurious justification for undesirable political action" (21).

Collective trauma and individual trauma are not wholly contradictory but unite in the notion of intergenerational trauma, trauma as communicable from one generation to another. The intergenerational transmission of trauma is, according to Yael Danieli, intrinsic to human history and "has been thought of, alluded to, written about, and examined in both oral and written histories in all societies, cultures, and religions" (1998, 2). Yet, although the psychological profession was slow to recognize the phenomenon (3), it currently constitutes a multidisciplinary field. Although it has been studied most thoroughly with Jewish survivors of the Holocaust and indigenous peoples in North America, it has been observed in different populations, contexts, and legacies, including the Vietnam War and repressive regimes in Russia and Chile. The modes of transmission range from the molecular to the psychological, the intrafamilial, and beyond to the socioethnocultural and the political, as Danieli's volume demonstrates.

Sometimes distinguishing between event-based or punctual trauma and intergenerational or more insidious forms of trauma can be difficult, for instance,

in the case of American slavery that lasted almost four hundred years. As William E. Cross, Jr., perceptively indicates, “How does one draw a straight line between slavery and, say, contemporary expressions of black ‘racial’ anxiety, without necessarily trivializing the instances of oppression faced by blacks since slavery?” (1998: 387). The ensuing and ongoing periods of oppression after American slavery “have trauma potential in their own right,” which “makes it a scientific nightmare to design a strategy capable of disentangling transcendental racial anxiety from racial anxiety grounded in postslavery or contemporary encounters with discrimination and injustice” (388). Even the Holocaust, which is often referred to as a punctual trauma, cannot, Craps indicates, be considered “a textbook example” of the event-based model because it continued for five years and involved many different events (Craps et al. 2015: 911).

Eduardo Duran’s articulation of the intergenerational or historical trauma of the colonization of Native Americans as a “soul wound” addresses past and contemporary indigenous experience of trauma alike: “Historical trauma is trauma that is multigenerational and cumulative over time; it extends beyond the life span” (Duran et al. 1998: 342). In this way, intergenerational trauma is an ongoing and cumulative process “via pressures brought on by acculturative stress” and the consequences of genocide, oppression, and racism (342). The soul wound can be seen as a form of insidious trauma, Laura Brown’s (2008) term (borrowed from Maria Root) for covert forms of violence that includes both racism and intergenerational trauma: Brown has criticized the definition of trauma as resulting from a single or isolated event for being indicative of a narrow (e.g., white middle-class heterosexual male) criterion that downplays or

excludes traumas resulting from prolonged, quotidian, or routine exposure to racism, sexism, homophobia, poverty, colonialism, and ableism.

Caruth's conception of trauma as an experience that can be transhistorically passed on across generations has become crucial as a source for theorizing intergenerational trauma in literary studies. Michelle Balaev believes that the concept of trauma in Caruth's assertion that "we are implicated in each other's traumas" makes "collective the specific experience of a group or individual in the past" thus producing "an unspecified action and effect as well as an indeterminate meaning of experience" (2014: 7). The problem with this is not only that it erodes the borders between group and individual, "thereby suggesting that a person's identity can be vicariously traumatized ... due to a shared genealogy that affords the label of victim as part of personal or public identity," but also that the false connection between individual and collective experience "obscures the different forms of violence, torture, and abuse that can produce different responses in different individuals" (Balaev 2012: 13, 16). Instead, Balaev's notion that the protagonist's role in trauma fiction is that of a cultural figure to reference historical periods in which collective traumas were experienced by a group of people of a specific race, gender, or culture in order to increase the knowledge of particular historical events is useful.

Concepts such as "secondary trauma," "intergenerational trauma," "insidious trauma," and "cumulative trauma" enrich our understandings of trauma but may also simultaneously undermine the meaningfulness of trauma as a concept. Their usefulness lies in their capacity to sharpen the distinctions between the past and the present as well as between victims and survivors, and

between spectators and readers. Although it is crucial to differentiate between, for instance, the primary trauma of victims and survivors, and the secondary trauma that an audience or a reader may experience, as well as between punctual and more insidious forms, in the words of LaCapra, “any idea of strictly mastering its use and defining its range may be self-defeating” (2001: 102).

But does some other disciplinary approach—\_ e.g., communication theory, in which the trauma process might be likened to a performative speech act – offer a more effective model for understanding collective trauma than does trauma theory per se, as has been suggested by critics like Alexander or Kansteiner? Cultural trauma analysts stress the media’s part in creating cultural trauma, but have so far largely refrained from collaborating with scholars in communication departments where research on the psychological effects of media on its viewers have been conducted for decades (Kansteiner 2004: 209). The concept of cultural trauma is helpful, Kansteiner argues, only as far as “we can show theoretically and/or empirically how the interplay between everyday life and electronic media produces something akin to trauma on a collective scale” (208). This can be accomplished, he proposes, through “experiments in self-guided immersion in digital violent worlds ... accompanied by extensive reception studies” (2014: 406).

Cooperation between trauma studies and communication theory may also advance knowledge as to our fascination with trauma, to what extent our obsession with it is simply a coping mechanism – an attempt to tame, manage, or control our fundamental anxieties and fears (an effort to attach meaning to a world that feels out of control, or to claim heroic significance in the face of terror

and death). For instance, media studies scholar Dolf Zillmann has found that media, including film and popular literature, can be used by audiences to regulate and manage their mood states (Rothe 2011: 96).

In addition to looking to other disciplinary approaches including media studies for an understanding of collective trauma, cultural trauma studies would perhaps benefit from reconsidering its interdisciplinary connections with psychology and history to attempt to unite conceptions of trauma among the fields. When trauma studies appeared in the 1990s, it was hoped that it would bring together conceptions of trauma and memory from different disciplines, especially literature, psychology, and history; yet, as Gibbs points out, this has not been “anywhere near achieved” (Craps et al. 2015: 914).

The growing awareness among psychologists of the necessity to move beyond discussions of a chance traumatic encounter in the past has so far not had a significant effect on cultural trauma studies. Nor, says Craps, is “[t]he impact of different cultural traditions on the way trauma is experienced and on the process of healing” generally recognized (Craps et al. 2015: 907). Much of trauma studies still relies on seminal works that focused on the Nazi Holocaust, modernism, and postmodern texts of the twentieth century by European and Euro American authors with mainly (post)deconstructive and psychoanalytic literary methods that were geared toward horrific events in the Western world. Yet, an increasing number of scholars emphasize a pluralistic trauma scholarship (see Balaev 2012; Craps et al 2015; Gibbs 2014; Luckhurst 2008). Such a scholarship means developing a culturally knowledgeable trauma theory that considers cultural differences in terms of various forms of representations of

experiences in extremis, refusing an ethnocentric and depoliticized discourse of dominance. Even Caruth responds to the criticism of trauma theory as apolitical by showing its political potentiality in her latest book, *Literature in the Ashes of History* (2013).

Explicit in the title of this chapter is the notion that there are problems in representing trauma; implied, however, is that despite these problems, representing trauma is also possible. Although the concept of trauma has been the object of considerable debate, the representation of trauma is not necessarily intrinsically problematic or limited, but the controversy is reflective of the multifarious means through which it has been conceptualized. As this chapter has shown, this conceptual heterogeneity has not so far dissuaded literary trauma scholars from developing new and creative approaches to the representation of trauma. New issues to consider emerge as understandings of the phenomenon are (de)constructed, and trauma studies must continue to address and theorize problems and limits of representing trauma, and a fortiori explore who sets these limits and for whose benefit, to keep the discipline ethically urgent.

Although a continued focus on the challenges of representing trauma is necessary, we should not forget to focus on possibilities and on the fact that atrocities and suffering have, after all, always been represented and will probably continue to be. A deluge of responses in different cultural and literary forms contests the predominant critical conception of trauma in terms of an aesthetic of unrepresentability. Says Roger Luckhurst, "Rather than privileging narrative rupture as the only proper mark of a trauma aesthetic, if the focus is

moved to consider narrative *possibility*, the potential for the configuration and refiguration of trauma in narrative, this opens up the different kinds of cultural work that trauma narratives undertake” (2008: 89). While literature is not the only site for exploring the representation of the wound that trauma is, it remains one place where trauma can productively be represented and examined, despite the problems that arise in the course of that representation.

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