

Against the Concept of Cultural Trauma
or
How I Learned to Love the Suffering of Others without the Help of Psychotherapy

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Handbooks celebrate the success stories of academic life. Handbook entries are supposed to be constructive and uplifting affairs which impart on future generations the academic insights of current generations, inform their readers in succinct fashion about important conceptual frameworks and methodologies, and demonstrate in what contexts and for what research agendas these intellectual tools can be applied most successfully. We will accomplish none of these objectives in the following text. Instead, we will inform you about a spectacular failure, the failure of scholars in the humanities and social sciences to develop a truly interdisciplinary trauma concept despite their many claims to the contrary. We will also present you with a culprit for this unfortunate development by blaming our colleagues for applying poststructuralist theory in rather unimaginative ways and, as a result, developing a strangely narrow and aestheticized concept of trauma.

After this announcement a short note may be in order. We hope very much that the following is not perceived as just another exercise in postmodern theory bashing. We are ourselves firmly committed to the venerable deconstructive project of questioning master narratives, exposing the ideological prejudices and blind spots of the discursive status quo, and pursuing cultural analysis in a radical self-reflexive fashion. In fact, we object to the postmodern trauma discourse, which is currently so popular in the humanities, precisely because it lacks self-reflexivity and has elevated the concept of cultural trauma into the status of a new master narrative. These negative effects are particularly pronounced in literature departments where trauma studies have contributed to the reestablishment of conventional procedures of textual exegesis as the be all and end all of the philological enterprise (Weilnböck). As a result, the very concepts that were originally developed in the context of a radical critique of traditional literary and cultural studies have been retooled and redeployed to serve these traditions. In the process, the trauma metaphor, initially adopted in a spirit of interdisciplinary collaboration, has helped reestablish literary and cultural studies as exclusive and anti-interdisciplinary academic fields.

Cathy Caruth's 1996 *Unclaimed Experience* represents the most influential, perhaps the foundational text of deconstructive trauma studies (see also Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*). All the key elements of the new trauma discourse are for the first time fully developed in this volume. Like many other scholars, Caruth defines trauma as an experience consisting of two components that the trauma victim never manages to reconcile with each other. A severe mental and maybe also physical injury

which the victim seems to overcome remarkably well is followed by a belated onset of symptoms that sometimes appear to bear no causal relationship to the original injury. At first sight, Caruth thus appears to define trauma in ways that are quite compatible with psychological research on trauma and post-traumatic stress. However, unlike most of her contemporaries who study the vicissitudes of mental suffering in a clinical context, Caruth goes on to celebrate the experience and the concept of trauma as providing unprecedented insight into the human condition. Applying an interpretive strategy borrowed from Paul de Man, Caruth emphasizes that the failure of the trauma victim to come to terms with the origins and symptoms of his/her mental illness represents a rare and valuable moment of authenticity because human beings only get a chance to perceive reality directly whenever our cultural systems of signification temporarily disintegrate under their own weight. In this way, trauma is conceived as a revelation that teaches us about the limits and possibilities of human culture. Unfortunately, however, at that moment of cultural disintegration and exceptional wisdom we are unable to fully understand, let alone successfully represent our insights. Or, as Caruth states in rather apocalyptic terms, “history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence” (*Unclaimed Experience* 18). For Caruth, this principal failure of representation constitutes “the truth and force of reality that trauma survivors face and quite often try to transmit to us” (*Trauma* vii).

Caruth’s compact model loses a lot of its appeal if one disagrees with its de Manian premise and believes that the limits of representation can be explored and overcome in some contexts and by way of a number of different representational strategies. But even if one shares Caruth’s deconstructive ethos, her model still constitutes a formidable moral conundrum that its author has neither acknowledged nor solved. From the perspective of the trauma victim whose very survival might depend on his/her ability to repair his/her trust in human systems of signification as quickly as possible, Caruth’s exuberant aesthetization and valorization of trauma appears ruthless, perhaps even cynical. This problem is exacerbated by Caruth’s disinterest in the therapeutic process. As other proponents of the deconstructive trauma paradigm, Caruth includes in her book extensive references to psychological studies of trauma, but this interdisciplinary gesture is immediately undermined by a very selective and often de-contextualized appropriation of the empirical literature. Caruth believes, for example, that the trauma experience will and should remain inaccessible to representation. These conclusions nicely confirm Caruth’s deconstructive axioms but they are not born out in the clinical literature. Many psychologists and therapists agree that traumatic experiences may be truthfully represented in everyday narrative language, for instance as the result of successful therapy (Leys).

Intellectual suspicions about the negative, self-destructive effects of Western culture and the Enlightenment, which are reflected in Caruth’s interventions, have a long and impressive tradition reaching back at least to the end of the nineteenth century. The suspicions appeared even more credible after World War II because Nazi society and its experiments in social and genetic engineering represent particularly frightful examples of human self-destruction. But the intellectual project of thinking against the grain of Western culture which still presented itself as an arduous and radically self-critical process in the writings of Adorno, Lyotard, and others has in the meantime turned into a self-important and convenient academic pursuit, especially but not exclusively in the

trendy celebrations of trauma (Kansteiner). Caruth is most certainly not responsible for this development but her model has been emphatically and apodictically embraced in a wide range of academic settings, uniting poststructuralist-inclined sociologists, political scientists, educators, and many cultural and literary studies experts under the sign of trauma.

In Germany, the deconstructive trauma paradigm has a particularly enthusiastic advocate in Manfred Weinberg, a literary anthropologist at the University of Konstanz. Like Caruth, Weinberg believes that trauma is “always already inscribed in memory” and has particular epistemological value, although, again following Caruth, he quickly adds that any conscious representation of trauma remains by definition “inadequate” (205) because “trauma is the inaccessible truth of remembering” (204). Weinberg regrets that many scholars have not properly understood or fail to respect the peculiar, contradictory logic of trauma according to which truth exists but cannot and may not be spelled out. In his assessment, academic writings on philosophy and history have the purpose to “make us forget about the traumatic flipside of all memory” and in this respect differ from literary texts which are capable of exploring the interdependency between trauma and memory in more honest and productive fashion (206).

Weinberg is refreshingly honest about his disinterest, even antagonism towards psychology and psychotherapy. He does not want to improve his knowledge about the suffering and clinical treatment of trauma victims and in this way help reduce the extent of traumatic injury occurring in the world. Weinberg states explicitly that “the clinical aspect is precisely what does not interest me—or only in a marginal way—about trauma” (173). Instead, he welcomes trauma as an indispensable conceptual tool and subscribes to a poststructuralist code of ethics by promising “to do anything he can to prove trauma’s incurability” and fend off any improper “abolition of trauma” (173). Weinberg’s confession highlights one of the most puzzling characteristics of deconstructive trauma theory. The proponents of the deconstructive trauma paradigm draw some of their key terms and concepts from psychoanalysis and psychology but they assume a radical anti-analytical and anti-empirical posture. Caruth, Weinberg, and their many intellectual fellow travelers like to speculate in an abstract manner about the philosophical meaning of trauma and apply these concepts in their study of culture and history, but they are not interested in the empirical phenomenon of trauma and the traumatic experiences of actual people. The advocates of the concept of cultural trauma do not simply emphasize that it is extremely difficult to access and understand trauma—an assessment shared by most clinicians—; they insist categorically that for conceptual reasons trauma “must remain inaccessible to memory” and cultural representation (Weinberg 204).

Weinberg is hardly the only representative of German cultural and literary studies who embraces the deconstructive trauma concept with quasi-religious fervor. There are many other scholars in the field ready to denounce any “sacrilege” that might be committed against what they perceive as the “integrity of trauma” (Baer 27). In the face of such threats, deconstructive trauma advocates issue stern warnings about “committing a betrayal that breaches the faithfulness towards the dead” although they tend to be rather vague about the precise meaning of these terms and their criteria of judgment (Sebold 121). But let’s leave the terrain of German cultural and literary studies and move to a different discipline and a different continent and see how the concept of trauma is used as a didactic tool at the University of Toronto. Roger Simon, the director of the Testimony

and Historical Memory Project, has studied extensively how human rights abuses and other crisis are best represented in museum exhibits. He has looked in particular at cultural memories of the Ravensbrück concentration camp, the AIDS epidemic, racially motivated lynching in the U.S., and the forced resettlement of indigenous populations in Canada. Simon seems to have approached these topics with a deep suspicion of all narrative forms of remembrance because narratives are often used to justify extreme violence, both before and after the fact. He would like to preserve the culturally disruptive effect of trauma and advocates with great pathos the creation of memorial spaces which avoid the normalizing, sedative power of narrative and call into question “the frames of certitude that ground our understandings of existence” (186). For this purpose, he reads survivor testimony looking for traces of the “absent presence” and encourages students and museum visitors to respond to representations of trauma in non-narrative formats—all the while taking considerable pride in his “risk-laden” search for new “forms of non-indifference” (187).

For somebody who is convinced about the destructive, normalizing effects of narrative the representational strategies promoted by Simon might appear very reasonable. But if one is willing to keep an open mind about narrative, as a potential tool of repression and misinformation as well as enlightenment and therapy, the didactic status quo in Toronto appears rather doctrinaire. The metaphorical fireworks of Simon’s text, an excellent example of deconstructive trauma philosophy, appear to be a rather obvious attempt to advance a very specific aesthetic program by tapping into the cultural-political capital of Holocaust memory.

The disdain for narrative and the fear of attempts to sublimate trauma are a stock-in-trade of deconstructive trauma studies. Caruth herself warns that any efforts to verbalize and integrate traumatic experiences will inevitably destroy the valuable precision of trauma. Even the intellectual historian Michael Roth who has shown himself to be critical of what he calls “poststructuralist trauma ontology” encourages us not to give in to “narrative lust” and, in the process, normalize and trivialize trauma (168). These statements of caution are certainly important and worth considering. Our culture produces indeed many dubious representations of trauma that might have unwelcome or even negative effects on their audiences. But the indiscriminate rejection of narrative renders the deconstructive trauma paradigm incompatible with the results of clinical research which has shown consistently that integrating traumatic experiences within narrative frameworks is an indispensable tool of psychotherapy and that narrative forms of representation help groups and collective entities to come to terms with events of violence and its mental and social consequences. In fact, anybody who encourages people to access the more troubled areas of their personal memory while at the same time preventing narrative processes from taking place potentially retraumatizes them and risks inducing a state of psychic dependency (Fischer 205).

Let’s visit another outpost of trauma studies at the University of Wales at Aberystwyth where Jenny Edkins teaches in the department of international politics. Her publications on trauma and politics, especially on the legacy of 9/11, provide a great case study for the way in which deconstructive trauma advocates move quickly from an understanding of trauma as injury to specific people to the abstract, metaphorical notion of trauma as a welcome disruption of existing frameworks of social and institutional incorporation without differentiating between these two levels of analysis in any

meaningful way. At the beginning of one of her texts, Edkins emphasizes appropriately that “it is people, in their physicality and their vulnerability, that [sic] experience the trauma, both bodily and psychic [sic], and it should be to them that the memories belong” (100). Edkins then embarks on an impressive theoretical excursion. First, she teaches us by ways of Lacanian psychoanalysis that all perceptions of the subject and society are social fantasies based on master signifiers which cover up the existential lack at the core of human perceptions of self and other. Then, she invokes Derrida to remind us that all truly political decisions involve a radical moment of undecidability because they require the inventions of new criteria of judgment that cannot be derived from the previous political status quo. By way of a number of additional theoretical stops, including Caruth, Agamben, and Foucault, we finally arrive at the predictable conclusion that trauma calls into question the perceptions of the world that give us a sense of security, for instance, by undermining the conventional distinctions between subject and object upon which these perceptions are based. Or, as Edkins puts it rather bluntly, events like September 11 reveal, among other things, the “indistinguishability of flesh and metal” (110).

With little deconstructive finesse, Edkins spells out the upbeat political lesson of her intervention. Since “trauma is clearly disruptive of settled stories” it threatens centralized political authority based on such stories and opens up venues for political resistance (107). Therefore, Edkins denounces president Bush’s insistence on conventional narratives of heroism and sacrifice and applauds artistic attempts that undermine such narratives and insist on the interpretive void created by trauma. After all this theoretical excess and political partisanship we have conveniently lost track of the victims and their physicality and mental vulnerability. What if the survivors, to whom the memories allegedly belong, would like to embrace stories of heroism and sacrifice and renew their belief in the fictitious, yet very helpful distinction between flesh and metal? What sense does it make to advocate extending the moment of trauma simply because on an abstract metaphorical level the experience of trauma aligns very nicely with the philosophical insights of Lacan, Derrida, and others? Can we responsibly ask people after events like 9/11 to embrace their mental injury and vulnerability and question linear notions of time and temporality despite the possibility that such recommendations, if actually implemented, might constitute severe psychological risks for some individuals and collectives?

We certainly do not want to imply that Edkins intends to do harm or has actually caused harm to anybody (nor do we assume this of Caruth, Weinberg, Simon, or the other authors whose texts we refer to in this essay). We are simply puzzled that academics who display considerable interdisciplinary ambition and dexterity—after all, Lacan’s and Derrida’s writings are not standard components of the graduate curriculum in international relations—do not feel comfortable with or compelled to tap into the empirical literature on trauma when they study the aftermath of concrete traumatic events such as 9/11. Finally, if one is really convinced that social crises are an opportune moment to question social fictions, one might want to begin closer to home and reflect self-critically about the academic fiction of cultural trauma which poststructuralist theorists might not have invented but certainly advocate vigorously.

The last stop on our international tour brings us back to U.S. academia, the heartland of cultural trauma studies, and, more specifically, to Yale University where deconstruction has a particularly long history. But we are not visiting the French or

Comparative Literature departments where de Man taught in the 1970s and 1980s, and instead look up Ron Eyerman, a sociologist who has studied the collective memory of American slavery and was part of a international group of scholars who convened at Yale in 1998/99 to study cultural trauma and collective identity (Alexander et al). Eyerman has compiled an impressive array of data about the representation of slavery in U.S. culture. But he has also committed a conceptual error that calls into question his interpretation of the data. According to Eyerman, cultural traumata—in this case the cultural trauma of slavery—are produced and reproduced through media representations which cause “a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric of a relatively coherent group,” for instance a nation or the African-American community in the U.S. (3). This definition of cultural or collective trauma reflects very nicely the common understanding of trauma as a serious form of injury but Eyerman does not present any empirical evidence for this allegedly destructive effect of films, TV shows, novels, and other cultural products which deal with the topic of slavery. Moreover, it is highly unlikely that such evidence exists. As best as we know, media texts may have a wide range of effects on its audiences but traumatic effects appear to occur extremely rarely. Finally and most important, many media representations of traumatic historical events, for instance the TV series *Roots* and *Holocaust*, have shaped group identities in ways that helped social minorities gain public recognition for past suffering. One might object to such developments for political reasons but it is misleading to describe the reconstitution of African-American and Jewish-American identity that occurred in the aftermath of these media events as cultural traumata even if the term is only applied in a metaphorical sense. Unfortunately, Eyerman’s error is hardly unique; many scholars in cultural trauma studies conceptualize the relationship between trauma, media, and collective identity in similarly simplistic terms and confuse representations of violence with the presence and reproduction of trauma. The work of Eyerman and others would profit tremendously from the development of sophisticated and variegated psychological tools that could replace the blunt concept of trauma and help us design much needed empirical studies of the effects of representations of war, genocide, and violence in contemporary media societies (Weilnböck and Kansteiner in this volume).

At the end of our short tour we do not want to allege a global conspiracy of trauma studies but we would like to emphasize that the many parallel paths taken during the institutionalization of postmodern thought in Western academia have produced remarkably similar results in different settings. It seems to be a general characteristic of this process of institutionalization, for example, that academics over a wide range of disciplines adamantly repeat a limited set of beliefs and stop asking, let alone try to answer, the really difficult theoretical and empirical questions about the ways in which human beings individually and collectively experience trauma and respond to the traumatic experiences of others. Obviously, there are important exceptions in the field of trauma studies and in this context we would like to highlight the work of Dominick LaCapra, who has very successfully applied psychological and psychoanalytical concepts in his analyses of Holocaust memory. LaCapra has also identified one of the fundamental conceptual errors at the core of the deconstructive trauma discourse. Many advocates of the concept of cultural trauma conflate the psychological challenges that all human beings face in their everyday life, especially in the process of maturation, with the extraordinary psychological ordeal encountered, for example, by victims of extreme

violence (LaCapra). As a result of this mistake, they assume that in one way or another all people partake in the experience of trauma, for instance, when they grapple with the inexorable relativism of all forms of human culture and communication.

Empirically speaking, however, in most societies and under most historical circumstances only a small part of the population suffers from what clinical criteria define as post-traumatic stress. Empirical studies have shown that survivors of extreme violence are particularly likely to belong to this part of the population and experience severe symptoms of mental distress. At the same time, it is also true that post-traumatic symptoms of various sorts can be caused by many different factors, including seemingly ordinary and pedestrian experiences, but that fact makes it all the more important to differentiate empirically and conceptually between different forms of violence and their social and psychological consequences.

In our assessment, the deconstructive trauma paradigm suffers from five fundamental, interrelated problems that we have tried to illustrate in this text:

- A vague, metaphorical concept of trauma which equates the concrete suffering of victims of violence with ontological questions concerning the fundamental ambivalence of human existence and communication, obliterates the important empirical differences between the various ways that people are affected by violence, and thus constitutes a grave insult toward people who actually suffer from post-traumatic stress.
- A surprising lack of interdisciplinary curiosity; the advocates of the deconstructive trauma paradigm selectively apply psychological and psychoanalytical terminology but they do that in a curiously anti-psychological manner and almost never systematically consult recent clinical literature which reports about the theory and practice of trauma therapy and raises serious questions about the concept of cultural trauma.
- A similarly disturbing disinterest in the empirical research on media effects; advocates of the deconstructive trauma paradigm assert that cultural traumata are produced and reproduced through the media but they have not tapped into the vast scholarly literature on media effects which contradicts such simplistic assumptions.
- An almost paranoid fear of narrative based on the axiom that all narration has distorting and normalizing effects and thus destroys the fundamental pre-narrative insights revealed by trauma. This anti-narrative reflex contradicts the consensus in psychotherapy studies that narration is an indispensable tool for healing.
- A valorization and aesthetization of trauma, high art, and philosophy as sites of intangible, ethereal authenticity; this stance fosters traditional perceptions of the humanities and academia, is inherently anti-empirical, and explains the ease with which scientific resources are ignored.

In conclusion, we would like to take you on a little metaphorical excursion of our own. In our assessment, the deconstructive trauma discourse seems to be compatible with the mindset and vantage point of a certain type of bystander who was not personally involved in any event of exceptional violence yet feels compelled to contemplate the meaning of such events in abstract philosophical terms. In fact, creating distance between

oneself and moments of extreme human suffering might be the whole point of the exercise because the bystander apparently wants to mentally eliminate the empirical experience of trauma by way of ontological speculation.

We think that the only plausible way to account for such intellectual ambition is to assume that the bystander is actually evading or denying some significant area of personal memory which half-consciously resonates with the historical trauma issues at hand. These mental associations, which accompany the work of the trauma theoretician, might encompass past experiences of limited mental injury or memories of committing or condoning minor violations and may appear irrelevant with hindsight. But unless the fleeting moments of violence are recognized as formative experiences, they will continue to trigger psychological defense mechanisms and curb the subject's intellectual curiosity. These speculations explain how our bystander could be troubled by an inscrutable mix of unconscious anxiety, latent guilt feelings, numbing of cognitive differentiation, and aggressive theoretical ambition. As a result, s/he begins to see theoretical trauma everywhere while refraining from talking about violence and suffering in any concrete fashion.

Obviously, the simile of the intellectual trauma theorist qua contemplative Holocaust bystander is meant as a metaphorical expression, although we consider it a more accurate and helpful metaphor than the cultural trauma metaphor itself. A lot of deconstructive trauma theory appears to represent an unsuccessful attempt to come to terms with events like the "Final Solution" and, more specifically, to work through the failure of the bystanders to prevent man-made disasters and deal with their legacies in productive ways. Our metaphor illustrates that there is no such thing as neutral by-standing—politically, personally, or scientifically—and this insight should be reflected in our scholarly work. We need to overcome the unfortunate epistemological impasse caused by contemplative trauma attachment and theoretical acting-out and develop new qualitative-empirical research tools to study the psychological effects of violence and its cultural representation with precision and theoretical dexterity (Weilnböck and Kansteiner, in this volume).

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