Cultural Trauma: Ron Eyerman and the Founding of a New Research Paradigm

by Eric Taylor Woods[1]

Abstract

The field of cultural trauma has reached the status of a research paradigm. Ron Eyerman has played a central role in this development. Since he first embarked on research into cultural trauma with several colleagues in 1999, Eyerman has maintained an intensive preoccupation with the topic, resulting in the publication of numerous books and essays. In this article, I review the development of Eyerman's approach to cultural trauma, with the broader aim of shedding light on this new research paradigm. I focus on several key themes in Eyerman's work, including: the relationship between event and representation; the significance of affect and emotion; the role of collective memory; the adoption of a dramaturgical perspective; and a multidimensional research methodology. To conclude, I discuss potential new directions in the study of cultural trauma.

Key Words: Ron Eyerman; Cultural Trauma; Cultural Sociology

Introduction

Ron Eyerman (forthcoming) observes in a recent book that the study of cultural trauma has now reached the status of a research paradigm. The speed at which this has occurred is remarkable. It was only in 1999 that he and his collaborators Jeffrey Alexander, Bernhard Giesen, Neil Smelser and Piotr Sztompka first embarked on a program of research into cultural trauma. Nearly twenty years on, it is timely to reflect upon the findings and achievements of this new research paradigm. Eyerman's *oeuvre* is a good place to start. As his prolific output attests, he has continued to be an important driver of research on cultural trauma. Since the publication in 2001 of his landmark case-study of slavery and African American identity, Eyerman has maintained an intensive, seemingly singular preoccupation with uncovering the meaning and significance of cultural trauma, resulting in numerous books and essays on the topic. Through close reading of his works, we can therefore not only gain valuable insights into the development of Eyerman's approach to cultural trauma, but also about this new research paradigm more generally. My aim in this essay is to initiate this important process. After discussing the concept of cultural trauma as it was first put forward in 2004, I examine several key themes in Eyerman's work, including: the relationship between event and representation; the significance of affect and emotion; the role of collective memory; the adoption of a dramaturgical perspective; and a multidimensional research methodology. To conclude, I reflect upon potential new directions in the study of cultural trauma.

Conceptualizing Cultural Trauma

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In 2004, Eyerman and his colleagues co-published their first major conceptual work on cultural trauma: *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Alexander et al., 2004). It has since become the foundational book in the field. The first two chapters by Alexander and Smelser provide programmatic statements outlining the concept of cultural trauma and how it ought to be studied. In this section, I present a broad summary of that discussion, before focusing on the evolution of Eyerman's approach since publication of the book. In defining cultural trauma, it is useful to distinguish it from other conceptions of trauma. The word trauma originated in the Greek language in the seventeenth century. At the time, it referred specifically to a physical wound. Trauma largely retains this definition in the field of medicine. In the nineteenth century, psychologists borrowed the term to create the concept of psychological trauma, which describes a 'wound' within the psyche. Both of these uses of trauma refer to an individual experience. By contrast, within sociology, trauma can refer to a collective experience, where the 'wound' is located at the level of the group.

Events involving widespread social upheaval, such as revolution, famine or economic disasters have long been of central concern to sociologists. Smelser (2004: 37) suggests that when these events disrupt a group's social structures they can be likened to a social trauma (in his contribution to the same book, Stompka (2004: 161) describes this kind of upheaval as a 'structural trauma'). A social trauma in this reading describes the breakdown of organized social life. The concept of cultural trauma also refers to a collective experience, but it is distinct from a social trauma. Cultural traumas occur in the cultural, rather than social, arena. According to Smelser (2004: 38) 'a cultural trauma refers to an invasive and overwhelming event that is believed to undermine or overwhelm one of several essential ingredients of a culture or the culture as a whole'. Here culture is defined as the pattern of elements (values, norms, beliefs, ideologies, knowledge, etc.) that constitute a group's meaning-system (Smelser, 2004: 38). Thus, a cultural trauma refers to the breakdown of a group's meaning-system. At its core, a cultural trauma can therefore be said to threaten collective identity.

The differences between a social trauma and a cultural trauma can be illustrated by returning to the two forms of individual trauma I mentioned earlier. Conceptually, social traumas are more closely related to physical traumas. Just as a physical trauma involves an injury to the body, a social trauma involves an 'injury' to a social structure. On the other hand, given its emphasis on meaning and identity, a cultural trauma is more closely related to a psychological trauma. Of course, despite their differences, social and cultural traumas can occur simultaneously, and very likely often impact each other. We can see this in Kai Erikson's (2012 [1976]) analysis of the impact of the flooding of the town Buffalo Creek in West Virginia, in which he describes how it affected the community's basic social structures and its collective sense of self.

Although psychological trauma and cultural trauma both describe crises of meaning and identity, the co-authors of *Collective Identity and Cultural Trauma* are at pains to emphasize throughout the book that they are not analogous phenomena; the former occurs in an individual's psyche and the latter is above all a social process. In other words, students of cultural trauma should avoid borrowing concepts from psychological trauma without accounting for all the asymmetries and cleavages that characterize modern social life. However, despite this injunction, Alexander *et al*. do see value in reflecting upon aspects of psychological trauma. In particular, they take inspiration from the finding that the context of

an event is more important than the event itself in determining the occurrence of psychological trauma (see Smelser, 2004: 34-5). This is to say that certain events, no matter how terrible they are objectively, do not necessarily produce a traumatic effect in every individual. Instead, it is the particularities of context that determines whether a psychological trauma will occur. Smelser (2004: 37) finds parallels in the unfolding of a cultural trauma, asserting that 'cultural traumas are for the most part historically made, not born.' This means that cultural traumas do not just occur by virtue of an event occurring, they must undergo a social process.

This basic insight provides Jeffrey Alexander (2004a) with the basis for elaborating a social constructionist approach to cultural trauma in the opening chapter of *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Alexander contrasts his approach with conventional realist approaches, such as Arthur Neal's (1998) analysis of the impact of several traumatic events in American history. In that work, Neal largely takes for granted that certain events are so shocking that they are by their very nature inherently traumatic. In opposition to this view, Alexander argues that no event has an inherent meaning prior to its interpretation. For Alexander, analyses of cultural trauma should therefore focus on how certain events become *represented* as traumatic, rather than assume that their meaning is self-evident. According to Alexander (2004a: 11), researchers should focus on the ontological 'gap between event and representation.' It is within this gap, Alexander suggests, that a process of cultural trauma can be found, typically expressed as an interpretative struggle over the meaning of the event.

Alexander submits that the key actors in a cultural trauma process are meaning-making agents referred to as carrier groups. Carrier groups seek to convey their interpretations of the event to the wider group. In doing so, they seek to construct a compelling narrative about the significance and meaning of the event – what Alexander (2004a: 12) refers to as a new 'master narrative'. The aim of this endeavor, Alexander stresses, is not necessarily to establish the verity of an event, but rather to capture the public imagination, such that the public *identifies* with a particular narrative. In undertaking this effort, Alexander observes that carrier groups are both constrained and enabled by their own skills of representation, as well as their social location and access to material and symbolic resources. Ultimately, the key point that Alexander is making here is that cultural traumas occur as a result of a complex, contingent and often highly contested social process. In a subsequent chapter in the book, Alexander (2004b) illustrates this approach through an examination of the representation of the Holocaust in the United States. For Alexander, it is not the fact that the Holocaust was so objectively horrifying that led to it becoming an almost universal symbol of evil in the modern world, but rather he shows that this occurred as the result of a process of social construction.

Having outlined how cultural trauma was initially conceptualized by Alexander and Smelser, for the remainder of this essay, I focus on several key themes in Eyerman's contribution to the development of this research paradigm.

Event and Representation

Eyerman's (2004) contribution to *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, which provides a summary of his book on cultural trauma and African American identity, broadly shares the approach to cultural trauma outlined by Alexander and Smelser. Indeed, the definition

provided by Eyerman at the outset of his essay paraphrases Smelser's linking of cultural trauma to meaning and identity: 'a cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning…' (Eyerman, 2004: 61). I discuss this important work by Eyerman in more depth later in this essay, but suffice to note here that it draws on the concept of cultural trauma to analyze a multigenerational endeavor among African American intellectuals to make sense of the history of slavery and its significance for their collective identity in the face of ongoing racism. It is slavery as a cultural construct that concerns Eyerman in this analysis rather than its objective meaning; he investigates how slavery was represented rather than what slavery actually entailed. However, although Eyerman takes a rather strong social constructionist approach in this analysis, his subsequent research on cultural trauma belies an increasing acknowledgement that, depending on the contexts in which they occur, certain events are indeed so shocking and upsetting that they should also be seen to play a part in how they are represented.

The evolution of Eyerman's approach has been shaped by his research. Following his study of African American identity, Eyerman began to focus on how cultural trauma processes are triggered. To do so, he carried out research on the role of political assassination in providing the spark that sets off a cultural trauma (see Eyerman, 2008; 2011). In this research, Eyerman interestingly finds that the performance of the event itself (in this case, an assassination) – has bearing on how it is subsequently represented. Later, in an analysis of a struggle over the representation of the Katyn Massacre – a catastrophic event involving the mass killing of thousands of Polish military personel and citizens by Soviet at the outset of the Second World War – Eyerman (and Bartmanski, 2011) suggests even more strongly that the objective nature of an event can influence its representation. Despite a decades-long attempt by Soviet authorities to control the meaning of the mass killings, Eyerman and Bartmanski show how families and friends privately held on to their own interpretations, such that once Soviet power began to weaken, demands for a renewed public airing of the meaning of the event arose. Reading this essay, it seems unlikely that the massacre would have continued to exert such enduring power in the face of state repression had it not been so inherently distressing. The objective nature of the event also looms large in Eyerman's (forthcoming) recent essay on collective responsibility and the Vietnam War. Here again, the act of mass killing – in this case, the massacre perpetrated by American soldiers at My Lai in 1968 – is so horrific that when it becomes known, certain meanings seem to be unavoidably associated with it. In Eyerman's analysis, the process of cultural trauma does not result from a confrontation over the meaning of My Lai *per se*, but rather it results from a confrontation over who is responsible. In all these recent studies, therefore, there is a sense that for Eyerman, processes of social construction are clearly important, but the reality of certain events matter too. In turn, this suggests that only certain kinds of events can trigger a cultural trauma. If there is a continuum between Alexander's constructionism and Neal's realism, Eyerman's current approach to the relationship between event and representation can therefore be said to be found somewhere near to the midpoint.

Affect and Emotion

Another significant development in Eyerman's approach is his increasing attention to the role of affect and emotion. In his 2004 definition of cultural trauma, Smelser (2004: 40) argues that affect is central to a cultural trauma process, going so far to state that if an event does

not become loaded with negative affect, then it cannot be considered traumatic. Yet despite this insight being made right at the beginning of research on cultural trauma, subsequent studies in the field have tended to downplay or ignore the role of affect and emotion in favor of focusing on the meaning-making strategies put forward by competing carrier groups – this is to say that they tend to emphasize the politics of the trauma process, rather than the emotions that accompanies it. Eyerman's recent analyses, however, have begun to provide a corrective to this approach.

For Eyerman, emotions are central to a cultural trauma. In fact, in a recent discussion of cultural trauma, Eyerman suggests that cultural traumas begin with a pre-cognitive, emotional response to an event. It is this emotional response which disrupts social life, and provokes efforts by carrier groups to subsequently assign meaning to the event. In other words, without a strong emotional reaction to an event, there would be no trauma process. Eyerman writes:

> There are two sides to a cultural trauma: an emotional experience and an interpretative reaction. Shocks arouse emotion by breaking everyday routines (behaviors as well as cognitive frameworks) and as such demand interpretation, opening a discursive field of interpretative opportunity where well-placed individuals can play a determinant role in making sense of what has occurred'. (Eyerman, 2015: 9)

It would be wrong to interpret this statement as arguing that affect and emotion is only important at the outset of a cultural trauma, before the more rational effort to assign meaning begins. Rather, Eyerman's work suggests that affect and emotion remain important throughout the interpretative process. In Eyerman's hands, carrier groups are shown to have been deeply affected by a potentially traumatic event. They are not distant 'cultural entrepreneurs', coolly seeking to ensure that the meaning of the event is constructed in a way that best suits their interests. Rather, their efforts to assign meaning are intertwined with their emotions. For example, in an article on the 1978 assassination of Harvey Milk, the first openly gay elected official in California, Eyerman (2012a) shows how Milk became embedded in American consciousness in large part because of the outpouring of grief that his assassination unleashed within the San Francisco gay community, thousands of whom marched in his memory. Later, when Milk's killer Dan White was perceived to have been treated too leniently by the criminal justice system, thousands took the streets once again, this time acting out of anger, in what is referred to as the 'white night riots'. Eyerman finds that even efforts to have Milk memorialized were driven by individuals who *felt* that his death must not be forgotten.

The centrality that Eyerman ascribes to emotion enables a new way of approaching a trauma process. It suggests that a primary aspect, if not *the* primary aspect, of a carrier group's efforts is the communication of affect and emotion. At its core, the trauma process, in this regard, can be seen as a process by which emotions are diffused throughout a society. From this perspective, it becomes apparent why cultural producers are such an important carrier group. Through dramatic reconstructions of an event via such mediums as music, film or books, the wider public can, by proxy, emotionally experience the meaning of an event. In turn, they might be so affected this experience to become a carrier themselves and contribute to the

further diffusion of these emotions. In this way, much like a moral panic, a spiraling of the trauma process occurs, as more and more members of the community become emotionally invested in an event.

In a recent definition, Eyerman (2012b) writes that a cultural trauma is a: '…discursive process, resulting from extreme violence and exposing the deep emotional base that grounds individual and collective identity, cultural trauma is both an articulation/representation of this emotional grounding and at the same time a working-through, a searching attempt at collective repair'. In this definition, not only does Eyerman tie cultural traumas to instances of extreme violence, but emotion is so central that he veers close to a psychological definition of trauma by including the concept of 'working through.' The use of this concept suggests that the trauma process is far from rational. Instead, it appears as an emotion-driven attempt to 'work through' what has happened, to make sense of a deeply upsetting event. By emphasising its emotional bases, this updated definition thus re-emphasises the *traumatic* aspect of cultural trauma.

A psychological trauma is characterised by individuals' inability to make sense of a deeply upsetting event. In other words, they are unable to incorporate the event into their sense of self. In his original elucidation of the concept, Freud therefore recommended that traumatic events be 'worked through' – a process of assigning meaning. There are parallels in Eyerman's approach to cultural trauma. An event might be met first with shock and horror by the community at large, before carrier groups, who are compelled by strong emotions, seek to establish their understanding of the event. If these carrier groups are successful, the community's collective identity might be transformed in the process. It is this process that we might understand as a collective 'working through.'

Collective Memory

Perhaps Eyerman's most important contribution to the study of cultural trauma are his efforts to situate it within the field of collective memory. Put simply, Eyerman defines collective memory as the biography of a group, it is a historical narrative of the making of a group's collective identity. Following the approach to collective memory first put forward by Durkheim's student Maurice Halbwachs (1992 [1925]), Eyerman views collective memory as a central component of individual memory, with the former providing a framework for the latter. Eyerman (2004: 161) writes: 'Collective memory unifies the group through time and over space by providing a narrative frame, a collective story, which locates the individual and his and her biography within it…' In this reading, collective memory is essential for the endurance of a group; it diachronically connects past and present, as well as synchronically connecting group and individual.

Departing from Durkheimian sociology, Eyerman does not view collective memory as an unchanging social fact. Rather, he suggests that it is a dynamic process. According to Eyerman, this process occurs by way of representation. Rather than existing solely in the mind, collective memory is externally represented. A group's past can be represented by a myriad of mnemonic practices: written, performed, filmed, sung, painted, sculpted, embodied, and much more (2004: 161). Moreover, these practices have multiple sources, in the sense that they are not only directed by a central organising body, but are also practiced 'from below',

in everyday life and as a part of social and intellectual movements. Finally, Eyerman emphasises that that in a segmented, modern society, collective memory is often contested. Sub-groups within a society might ascribe to 'counter-memories', while new generations might reject their predecessors' perspectives of the past (Eyerman, 2004: 162).

To return to his study of African American identity, Eyerman (2004) shows in this work how cultural trauma can become a key component of a group's collective memory, such that historical narratives of the group are grounded in loss and suffering. To illustrate, Eyerman focuses on how slavery, as an exemplar of cultural trauma, has endured since the end of the civil war as the key point of departure in the narration of African American collective memory. It is the 'primal scene', or 'root', from which narratives of black identity in the United States begin (Eyerman 2004: 60). Interestingly, Eyerman shows that situating a cultural trauma at the root of collective memory in this way has implications for how it is narrated. Unlike collective identities that have as their 'primal scene' an imagined glorious past, which can be recalled positively for succor and inspiration, the recollection of a cultural trauma is loaded with negative affect. Cultural traumas, Eyerman (2004: 63) therefore suggests, need to be 'repaired.' This is to say that narratives of collective memory must make sense of the trauma, to put it into the broader context of the history of the group. In the case of African Americans, the history of slavery raises several important questions that need to be addressed. What does it mean to belong to a group that is descended from slaves? What does it mean to be living in a present in which racism endure? What does it mean for the future?

In addressing these kinds questions, Eyerman observes that black intellectuals have tended to coalesce around one of two narratives: a progressive narrative and a tragic narrative. In the progressive narrative, most visibly associated with Martin Luther King, the remembrance of slavery functions as a measure for the progress of black Americans. Slavery, in this narrative, is framed as a stepping stone in their collective self-fulfillment and, ultimately, full integration into American society. By contrast, in the tragic narrative, which is exemplified by figures such as Malcolm X, slavery is not confined to the past. Instead, the tragic narrative emphasizes the endurance of slavery's pernicious legacies, which continue to be experienced through ongoing racism. The path to redemption according the tragic narrative will not be achieved through integration into American society, but rather through self-determination.

Commenting on how more recent generations have articulated African American collective memory, Eyerman notes that slavery remains the cornerstone. The apparent indelibility of slavery provides an important clue that it indeed constitutes a cultural trauma – that it is seemingly impossible to reconstruct a 'post-slavery' collective identity. Yet, the fact that slavery is continually re-inscribed in collective memory also helps to ensure that African American collective identity endures. In this regard, Eyerman's work suggests that even though a cultural trauma may be loaded with negative affect, and even though it can provoke deep divisions over its meaning, it can also provide the thread of continuity that unifies a group through time. From this perspective, cultural traumas appear to not only be fracturing, but also a potential source of solidarity. Slavery distinguishes black Americans as a group and, as such, has the potential to unify them, whether or not they directly experience it. Thus, Eyerman (2004: 86) cites African American intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois, who wrote of how the cultural practices that emerged from the experience of slavery, such as 'sorrow songs' from

the south, resonated with him as if they were already a part of him, despite not being from the south nor directly experiencing slavery.

Eyerman's subsequent works on political assassination (2008; 2011) have further uncovered insights on the relationship between cultural trauma and collective memory. In this regard, Eyerman shows that cultural traumas rarely occur *ex nihilo*. Rather, they more likely occur in a collectivity that has been periodically riven by cultural traumas throughout its history. According to Eyerman, the ways in which past cultural traumas are remembered will have bearing on the unfolding of subsequent cultural traumas. Thus, Eyerman (2008) shows how the cultural trauma that was triggered by the assassination in 2004 of former film director Theo van Gogh was partly structured by the 'memory traces' of several traumatic events: the treatment of Jews during German occupation; the loss of Dutch colonies; and the Dutch military's ineffectual response to the murder of Muslims in Srebrenica in 1995. In Eyerman's interpretation, Dutch collective memory thus appears to contain several layers of cultural traumas. Furthermore, many of these cultural traumas have not been completely resolved, and therefore remain capable of provoking emotion and division. And when this happens, Eyerman suggests that are capable of blurring into one another, creating deeper, ever more complex divisions within society, with multiple points of origin. Ultimately, this process can engulf society, such that the existential question of 'who are we?' comes to the fore. Eyerman shows how this happens in the public discourse that followed van Gogh's assassination, which very rapidly spiraled beyond the assassination itself to focus on the question of what it means to be Dutch.

Eyerman (2011) builds on this finding in a subsequent comparative analysis of why some political assassinations trigger a cultural trauma process whereas others do not. Why, Eyerman (2011: 147-48) asks, did the murders in the Netherlands of former politician Pim Fortuyn and van Gogh set off a debate about the foundations of national identity, but the murders in Sweden of former Prime Minister Olof Palme and former foreign minister Anna Lindh did not? In response to this question, Eyerman underscores firstly the importance of a clearly discernible political motive. In the Swedish case, the motives for the assassinations were unknown, and seemingly apolitical. They were thus met principally with grief and confusion. By contrast, the perpetrators of the assassinations in the Netherlands announced their political motives, particularly in the case of the assassination of van Gogh, in which the perpetrator Mohammed Bouyeri made clear that he was motivated by a radical Islamist ideology. This focused attention on the place of Islam in Dutch society, and thereby provided a cipher for the ensuing public debate. But motive is not the only factor determining the onset of a cultural trauma. Here Eyerman argues that collective memory plays an important role as well. With little relevant historical memory to draw upon, public debates in Sweden were limited to discussions of policing and security. However, in the Dutch case, carrier groups continually connected the assassination of van Gogh to the unresolved cultural traumas that I mentioned above, which eventually threw into question the basis of Dutch national identity.

A Dramaturgical Perspective

Eyerman's turn towards the question of how cultural traumas are triggered via the phenomenon of political assassination has also prompted theoretical innovation. More specifically, it is at this juncture that he begins to incorporate a dramaturgical perspective into

his analysis of cultural trauma. In the first instance, this provides Eyerman with a framework for uncovering how cultural traumas are initially triggered, while also shedding light on the significance of individuals. For example, in his study of the impact of the assassination of van Gogh, Eyerman (2008) begins with a close reading of the assassination itself. How was it carried out? Where? What time? Who was the perpetrator? What was his background, social location, status? What kind of weapon did he use? What were his motivations? Equally important is the victim. Who was he? Why him? What was his background, social location, status? In reconstructing the assassination in this way, Eyerman interprets it as a kind of theatrical performance. Much like an actor on a stage, Bouyeri is depicted as attempting to convey particular meanings to his 'audience', which in this case was primarily Dutch society. Eyerman then uses the findings of his dramaturgical reconstruction to help him understand why the audience *cum* Dutch public responded in the ways that it did. All of this is then situated within a historical perspective through the use of the concept of collective memory. By adopting a dramaturgical perspective, Eyerman therefore provides a framework for connecting microscopic, macroscopic and historical perspectives in the analysis of cultural trauma.

Eyerman's interest in a dramaturgical perspective also leads to a refinement of his definition of what is a cultural trauma. One of the aims of his study of the assassination of van Gogh is to distinguish a cultural trauma from a social drama. The concept of social drama was developed by anthropologist Victor Turner as a framework for analyzing how societal conflicts over meaning unfold (see Turner, 1974. There are clearly affinities between a social drama model and a cultural trauma, particularly in the way that Alexander (2004a) originally elaborated the latter. However, prior to Eyerman's study, theorists of cultural trauma had not yet discussed in depth how these two heuristic devices are related. For Eyerman, they can be principally distinguished by their intensity. Social dramas begin with a 'breach' of a social norm. If this is followed by a period of mounting crisis, wherein competing actors seek to resolve the breach, the underlying 'root paradigms' of a collectivity can become exposed, to become the object of public scrutiny and debate. Eyerman (2008: 22) suggests that in extraordinary cases, this process can set off a cultural trauma, in which the 'social contract and stable collective identity of a society' is threatened. This is precisely what occurs, Eyerman argues, in cases where a political assassination leads a cultural trauma; the assassination is perceived to 'breach' a social norm, which sets off a public debate over its meaning, and which is eventually transformed into a full-blown cultural trauma.

A Multidimensional Research Methodology

I have so far focused on several key themes in Eyerman's theorization of cultural trauma, but the development of his theoretical approach is based on rigorous research, and his methods for doing so are also worthy of discussion. Eyerman's research methodology reflects his call in 2008 (pg. 23) for the importance of 'thick explanation'. I understand this as a call to incorporate as many relevant perspectives into analysis as possible. In this regard, Eyerman's research is remarkably multidimensional. Going against the grain of contemporary sociology, Eyerman does not try to isolate and explain specific aspects of the cultural trauma process, but rather he tries to provide a 'big picture' of how it unfolds.

Three main elements comprise Eyerman's research on cultural trauma: individuals; public discourse; and historical context. In the preceding section, I outlined how Eyerman has recently adopted a dramaturgical approach to shed light on how individual actions relate to wider public discourses. How, then, does Eyerman analyze public discourse? Who are the key interlocutors of this discourse – whom Alexander refers to as 'carrier groups'? Here Eyerman casts a wide net. The concept of a carrier group, in Eyerman's interpretation, encompasses a broad range of social actors. Drawing on his previous work on intellectuals (see Eyerman, 1994), Eyerman does not limit his research to certain types of professions, such as journalism, which are specifically aimed at meaning-making in the public sphere. Rather, for Eyerman, all social actors who participate in a trauma process by seeking to publicly attribute meaning can be considered a 'carrier' (see Eyerman 2011). Certainly, mass media is important for Eyerman, but he also consider a wide range of other professions to be relevant, such as: academics, writers, film-makers, artists, musicians, politicians, and anyone else who makes a significant contribution to public understandings of a potentially traumatic event. To analyze the meanings that this diverse group seeks to convey, Eyerman does not limit himself to one kind of representation, but rather he investigates numerous modalities, including written, visual and sonic representations. An exemplar of this kind of research is Eyerman's (2015) recent book on Hurricane Katrina; each substantive chapter is focused on how the trauma process unfolded in a different cultural field, including: print media, popular culture, and television. Finally, after gathering data related to these various public responses, Eyerman turns to the third element of his research framework: historical context. Here Eyerman employs a methodology akin to the genealogical method made famous by Michel Foucault, in which he traces the meanings associated with the trauma process backward in time to see how they relate to past events. It is at this juncture in Eyerman's research where the concept of collective memory, which I discussed earlier in this essay, becomes important.

In order to find coherence among the various elements of his research, as we have seen, Eyerman makes use of narrative analysis. In Eyerman's hands, a cultural trauma is cast as a struggle over how an event should be narrated. From this perspective, the primary task of carrier groups is to tell a compelling story. By framing a cultural trauma in this way, Eyerman is able to find patterns in the meanings put forward by various carrier groups. This sheds light on how seemingly disparate meanings are in fact part of larger narrative patterns, which not only shape contemporary discourse, but can also have deep historical roots. This methodology also helps to shed light on whether there are any axes of contestation in a trauma process, in which carrier groups align themselves with competing narratives. For example, as I discussed earlier, Eyerman (2001) demonstrates how this occurred in his study of slavery and African American identity, in which he finds that carrier groups have tended to align with one of two competing narratives.

The final significant aspect of Eyerman's research methodology is his attention to the broader societal context in which cultural traumas occur. Eyerman's body of work suggests that cultural traumas do not occur isolation, but that they are also shaped by existing societal cleavages and asymmetries (as well as potentially giving rise to new ones). For example, throughout his study of the impact of Hurricane Katrina on America's cultural life, Eyerman (2015) continually reminds readers that the racist structure of American society affected how this event was perceived. Interestingly, he also discusses the inverse, by emphasizing that Katrina also affected race relations. Thus, the cultural trauma that Katrina triggered was

shaped by the racist context in which it occurred, but at the same time it also inflamed race-related tensions. A similar dynamic is apparent in Eyerman's (forthcoming) analysis of the struggle over collective responsibility for the My Lai massacre; on the one hand, he shows how public debates over the massacre were structured by existing cleavages over the Vietnam War, but on the other hand these debates seemed to breathe new life into those cleavages. Eyerman's attention to the broader societal context also provides insights as to why some cultural traumas fade, while others endure. For example, the mass killings at My Lai no longer provokes the same kind of intense emotional response among the American public as it once did. This is in large part because the war in Vietnam has ended. By contrast, slavery remains a preoccupation for many African Americans because its legacies endure.

Thus, by paying attention to three key elements of a cultural trauma – individuals, public discourse, and historical context – Eyerman uncovers a middle range social process comprised of agentic individuals who creatively seek to construct meaning, but who, in doing so, are also partly structured by contemporaneous public debates, and historically constituted patterns of meaning. He analyses the meanings involved in this process as narratives, such that the trauma process appears as a struggle to establish a particular story about an event. Finally, Eyerman examines how this process is shaped by, and also shapes, the broader societal context.

Conclusion

In Eyerman's work, cultural traumas are a recurring phenomenon. As much as catastrophe is inevitable, cultural traumas seem to be intrinsic to collective life. When they occur, Eyerman finds that cultural traumas unfold according to a broadly similar pattern, as a catastrophic or shocking event is loaded with negative affect and subsequently becomes the basis for a struggle over the meaning of collective identity. In this regard, cultural traumas are similar to Turner's social drama model. However, whereas Turner suggested that social dramas are an ahistorical and universal process, and on that basis developed a framework for analyzing social dramas in all social contexts, in Eyerman's hands, the structure and outcome of cultural traumas are much less predictable. For Eyerman, some cultural traumas unfold like a volcanic explosion, erupting suddenly, but fading just as rapidly. Others simmer over the *longue duree*, shaping debates over collective identity for many generations. Some cultural traumas, according to Eyerman, divide communities. Yet, by bringing the question of 'who are we' to the fore, he observes that they can also invigorate solidarity. Indeed, some cultural traumas can even provide the foundation for a new collective identity.

Eyerman's work paves the way for several potential new lines of research on cultural trauma. His findings on the centrifugal and centripetal tendencies of cultural trauma beg further research. Which factors lead to one outcome or the other? On the one hand, as far as I'm aware, there has not yet been a study of a case in which a cultural trauma was so divisive that it led to the splintering of collective identity. How does this occur? How do new collective identities emerge, and what is the significance of cultural trauma in this process? On the other hand, what of the question of 'repair'? Eyerman suggests that cultural traumas need to be repaired, but how does this occur? Various forms of symbolic redress, such as political apologies and truth and reconciliation commissions (TRC), have become increasingly visible in recent decades. Can these new rituals be understood as efforts to repair cultural trauma?

What other forms of ritual repair are there? Eyerman's comparative work on the question of why some political assassinations trigger a cultural trauma in one community but not in another, raises a deeper, foundational, question: are some communities more prone to cultural trauma than others? If so, why? Can we speak of a kind of cultural 'resilience'?

Eyerman seeks to build a middle-range theory; he focuses on how cultural traumas unfold within large groups, particularly within nation-states. There is much to be gained by shifting the lens of research on cultural trauma. If we were to adopt a macroscopic perspective, this would enable research on the impact of cultural traumas beyond the nation-state by asking how they are perceived elsewhere. Can cultural traumas spread beyond the boundaries of a nation-state, such that we might speak of a transnational or international cultural trauma? How does this occur? There is also an as yet unanswered macroscopic, historical question. I asked in the preceding paragraph whether some collectivities are more prone to cultural trauma than others. This question can also be posed from a historical perspective: are we in an era where societies are generally becoming more prone to cultural trauma? There is also scope for research on cultural trauma to take a more microscopic approach, to focus on the impact of cultural traumas on the minutiae of everyday life. How do cultural traumas affect friendships, family dynamics, the workplace, etc?

Eyerman's (2011) essay on the role of intellectuals in a cultural trauma hints at new potential new directions in research methodology. In particular, he includes a discussion of the implications of the rise of new media technologies, which has enabled many more people to participate in public life than previously. As Eyerman observes, anyone with a blog could be labeled a 'public intellectual', in the sense that they are participating in the social construction of meaning. We could similarly include anyone who posts on social media or participates in online forums. This suggests that analyses of cultural trauma should move beyond conventional carrier groups to include ordinary people who come to fore through new media technologies. This kind of research might shed light on the possibility of a cultural trauma emerging from a 'bottom-up' process via online networks.

In 'Social Theory and Trauma', Eyerman (2013) undertakes a cultural analysis of several important texts in social theory. Rather than engage with their arguments, Eyerman seeks to uncover the meanings associated with these texts, specifically whether they follow a particular narrative pattern. It seems fitting to conclude this review of Eyerman's work with a similar exercise. What kind of narratives underlie Eyerman's analyses of cultural trauma? As I noted earlier, in his essay on African American identity, Eyerman uncovers two leading narratives of slavery: a progressive narrative and a tragic narrative. The former looks to a better future; it is a story about overcoming suffering. The latter denies the possibility of a better future; it suggests that suffering will not be overcome. If we apply this framework to Eyerman's analyses of cultural trauma, it becomes immediately clear that they do not follow a progressive narrative. Rather, they conform more closely to a tragic narrative. In Eyerman's works, there is ultimately no final escape from a cultural trauma, no progression to a better place. The searing emotions associated with a cultural trauma might lessen, but they do not completely disappear. Eyerman often uses metaphors borrowed from physical trauma, likening a cultural trauma to an 'open wound' within a community. According to Eyerman, even if the wound heals, the community will remain scarred. And for Eyerman, there is always a chance that those scars can become enflamed and wrenched open again. A community

might be transformed by a cultural trauma, but it does not progress. As the community encounters new challenges, there will always be the possibility that a cultural trauma will recur.

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