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# "Now I Am What I Saw:" Trauma, Witness, and Untellable Narratives

James Kozol Wojtal '18, and Jené L Schoenfeld, Ph.D. Kenyon College Summer Scholar 2016

#### Thesis

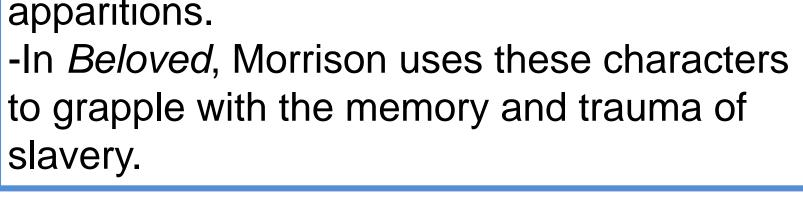
-By aligning the witness with the victim, Morrison, Delbo, and Metres illustrate that bearing witness to something untellable, rather than attempting to empathize, acts as a more useful form of understanding. This association not only helps witnesses process their guilt as survivors, bystanders, or supporters of the torture, but it also brings the reader closer to seeing the untellable horror. -An untellable trauma describes any type of trauma that cannot be understood at its core. Many untellable traumas are not described within their narratives. Or the author uses fragmented narrative

techniques that mirror the experience of the trauma. -At the core of the untellable trauma is the idea that the audience cannot comprehend the pain that the incident caused.

#### Beloved

- -Beloved tells the story of the former slaves Sethe and Paul D, as well as Sethe's daughter, Denver.
- -They come upon a mysterious young woman named Beloved, who, in many ways, resembles the daughter Sethe murdered. -Beloved incorporates the supernatural in the form of ghosts, strange voices, and
- apparitions. to grapple with the memory and trauma of

is still untellable.



#### Analysis

- -In Beloved, Morrison describes many different untellable stories. -The clearest one is that of Ella, a woman in the community. Her trauma is so painful that even Morrison cannot put it into words. -With Paul D's traumatic past, Morrison can narrate it, making it partially tellable. However, he cannot discuss his own pain. Thus it
- -Sethe's incident of trauma, called the Misery, is different from the traumas of Ella and Paul D. She, and many other characters, narrate the Misery, when she murdered her own daughter, many times throughout the novel. What makes this trauma untellable if it can be narrated?
- -Although many characters discuss the Misery, none of them understand Sethe's reasons for killing her own daughter. They cannot comprehend the pain behind this trauma, no matter how she explains. Her trauma is untellable because it cannot be conveyed to others.
- -Morrison uses witnessing to help her reader attain proximity to these untellable traumas.
- -Because the traumas of *Beloved* cannot be comprehended by the reader, Morrison uses the witness to bring the reader closer to the trauma itself.
- -We may view traumatic incidents through the eyes of the witnesses. This is because we more easily identify with the role of the witness.
- -In viewing the stories through witnesses, we come closer to understanding these traumatic narratives than we would by simply hearing them from the survivors of the incidents.
- -In Beloved, Morrison bridges the gap between survivors of traumas and reader using the witnesses of trauma.

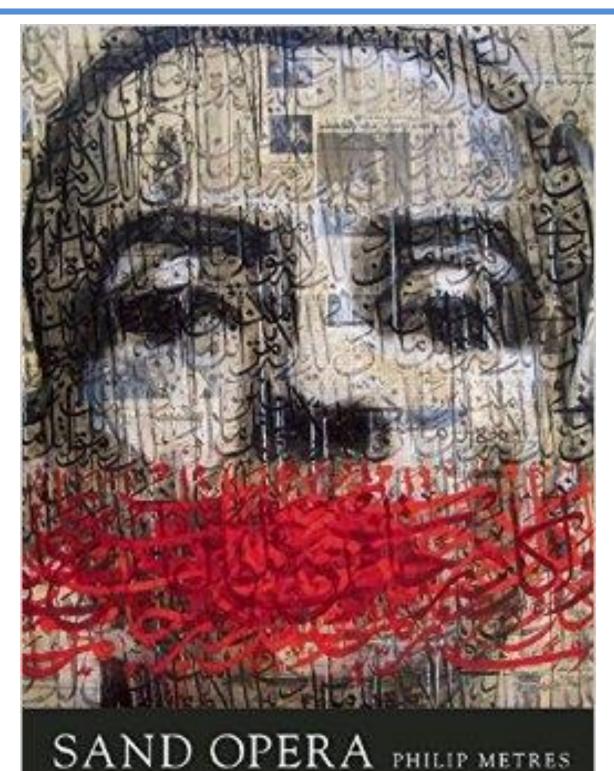
## Acknowledgments

I'd like to thank many people for supporting me while I wrote this paper. My parents, for introducing me to these texts, and for pushing me to write this difficult essay. Leah, for helping me delve further into the essay. Taylor, for comforting me, when I thought I could not write another page. I'd like to thank the staff and RAs of Kenyon Young Writers for allowing me to complete this research while I was working on another job. And, of course, Professor Schoenfeld, for believing in this project when I proposed it, for advising me from the beginning, and from editing my delusional writings down into a readable paper, and for supporting me throughout the entire process. This project was funded by the Kenyon College Summer Scholars program.

#### Sand Opera

Sand Opera is a book of poetry by Philip Metres published in 2015. In it, Metres discusses various issues, including issues of war, torture, and being Arab American. Metres emphasizes the atrocities committed by the US Government through erasure poetry in his section entitled Abu Ghraib Arias.

- -Erasure poetry occurs when a poet erases a portion of a text to create a new poem.
- -The words may be written by them or by someone else.
- -They may erase in many diverse ways, including typical erasure, black-box redaction, and the changing of font colors to display fading or degradation.



-In Abu Ghraib Arias, Metres modifies narratives of torture from prisoners at Abu Ghraib. -He also utilizes statements by soldiers present at Abu Ghraib, and the Standard Operating Procedure of Camp Delta at Guantanamo Bay. -Metres modifies these texts to indict the torture, and the trauma that the prisoners suffered.

This first (echo/ex) is a full

narrative of torture, and has

not been completely erased.

been rendered in gray font

to evoke the idea of fading

words. Metres shows how

the narrative changes when

the faded words are omitted.

and your eyes shall be

Some of the texted has

## (echo/ex) Poems

In the name of God I swear to God everything I witnessed

everything I am talking about. I am not saying this to gain any

naterial thing, and I was not pressured to do so by any forces. I

will not talk about what happened when I was in jail before,

going to fuck you," thy name shall be and he said this in Arabic.

nands with irons behind my back to the metal of the window, to

he point that my feet were on the ground and I was hanging there

took a picture of me because they beat me so bad I lost

In these next two poems,

Metres begins the erasure

words, and redacting them

redaction produces a sense of

expectation, whereas, the pure

erasure confuses and startles

process, both by deleting

with black boxes. The

the reader.

The poems are a series all entitled (echo/ex). I've presented them here in the order they appear. I will examine how they progress as the book of poetry continues.

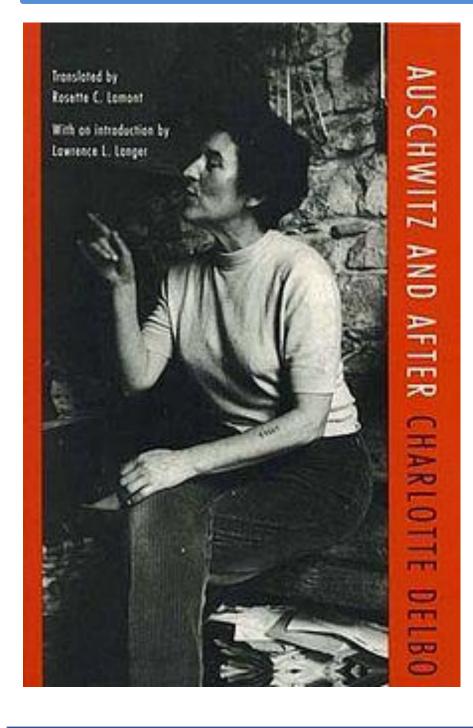


In these last two poems, Metres takes the erasure to the extreme. In the poem on the left, he comments on how torture erases the sense of self by showing a poem erased entirely to pronouns. In the poem on the right, he creates a skeletal poem out of punctuation to emphasize the emptiness that the prisoners

In the *(echo/ex)* series, Metres demonstrates how erasure can describe narratives of untellable trauma. He uses the placement of erasure to excite and intrigue the reader and to question what lies beneath the erasure. What has been silenced? He often modifies narratives in which prisoners recount trauma they saw. These poems emphasize the guilt that witnesses may feel if they do not act. Ultimately, Metres asserts that, as readers of this text, we are as culpable for witnessing these traumas, and that it is our duty to act against the horrible atrocities committed by the US Government. In his indictment of these acts, he concludes that, as witnesses of this text, we must understand our place within the perpetration of this torture.

#### Auschwitz, et Après

Auschwitz, et Après, or Auschwitz, and After, was written by Charlotte Delbo after her time at Auschwitz during WWII. She was captures by the Nazis after helping to fight with the French resistance. Her memoir is broken into three parts, each of which uses prose vignettes and poetry to convey her story.



-The first section, None of Use Will Return, discusses Delbo's time at Auschwitz. -The second section, Useless Knowledge, describes her last days in Auschwitz, her move to Ravensbrück, and her release from imprisonment. -The last section, *The* Measure of Our Days, meditates on Delbo's life after the war, and its effects on her.

#### Analysis

-Delbo also works with ideas of untellable stories that cannot be spoken or heard.

-She uses aural images of silence to emphasize the unknowability of the traumas that occurred at Auschwitz. -She also asserts that the suffering of the Holocaust was beyond human conception, an idea also found in Beloved.

-Also like Morrison, she questions how survivors of trauma learn to live after the suffering they have experienced.

-However, Delbo experiments with the physical transformation of the body. In several vignettes, while describing a trauma she witnessed, Delbo becomes transmuted into the body of the victim.

-Like Morrison, her goal in this transmutation is to bring the reader closer to the traumatic incident.

-Delbo also condemns a response that she encountered after surviving the camps: the need for non-survivors to comprehend her pain.

-She criticizes those who ask her about her experiences before she is ready to share, and those who wish to appropriate her pain. She concludes that some trauma cannot be understood by non-survivors.

-Delbo ends her memoir by indicating that telling and discussing, when they are ready, can help survivors process, and move on from their pain.

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