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# Trauma Theory: Contexts, Politics, Ethics

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**Abstract:**

This article discusses the current ‘popularity’ of trauma research in the Humanities and examines the ethics and politics of trauma theory, as exemplified in the writings of Caruth and Felman and Laub. Written from a position informed by Laplanchean and object relations psychoanalytic theory, it begins by examining and offering a critique of trauma theory’s model of subjectivity, and its relations with theories of referentiality and representation, history and testimony. Next, it proposes that although trauma theory’s subject matter—the sufferings of others—makes critique difficult, the theory’s politics, its exclusions and inclusions, and its unconscious drives and desires are as deserving of attention as those of any other theory. Arguing that the political and cultural contexts within which this theory has risen to prominence have remained largely unexamined, the article concludes by proposing that trauma theory needs to act as a brake against rather than as a vehicle for cultural and political Manicheanism.

**Keywords:** trauma theory; culture; ethics; politics; memory; subjectivity; history

Since the early 1990s, trauma’s star has been rising within the academic firmament. If academic fashions and fascinations can be linked with publications then the growth of interest in trauma within the humanities can certainly be mapped by reference to the publication of particular texts that have since become seminal within the field: Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* was published in 1992, Cathy Caruth’s edited collection *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* in 1995 and her monograph *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* in 1996.<sup>1</sup> These are undoubtedly the books which opened up the Humanities to trauma. But books do not make their mark in a vacuum. Their impact and influence stems, to a large degree, from the contexts within which they are read and received. Pointing to influential texts raises questions, then, concerning both the academic and cultural contexts into which these books emerged and the part played by these contexts in the consequent adoption, canonization and development within

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the Humanities of the theories and perspectives disseminated by these volumes. Though the rise of cultural movements and moods serves as the object of study for cultural and social studies, the ascendance of theories and ideas within the Humanities themselves is less commonly placed under such scrutiny. This essay's aim, then, is to consider the rise of trauma theory within its academic contexts and to open up some discussion of the promise and limitations of trauma theory.

The term 'trauma theory' first appears in Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (72). In the following essay, I use the term to refer primarily to the work of Caruth, and to that of Felman and Laub, whose writings on trauma are showcased in Caruth's collection *Trauma: Explorations In Memory*, and whose significance to Caruth is marked by an acknowledgement to Felman in Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (ix). Trauma theory, as several of the contributors noted in 'Special Debate: Trauma and Screen Studies', a dossier on trauma which I edited and introduced,<sup>2</sup> presages movement beyond a series of apparent theoretical impasses. However, the rise of what is becoming almost a new theoretical orthodoxy invites — requires, even, perhaps — some reflection on and reflexivity concerning its implications and contexts, as well as some consideration of the paths not taken by trauma theory. This essay aims to encourage, then, an engaged and critical relationship to what has become known as 'trauma theory', and to question what I have called 'the apparently oxymoronic "popularity" of trauma' (*TD*, 189).

#### *The Academic Context for Trauma Studies*

The category of 'trauma theory' is now referred to frequently in writings in the Humanities.<sup>3</sup> Though there are repeated references to this theory, its provenance and reach are, however, rarely traced. The trauma theory developed in the writings of Caruth and Felman and Laub owes much, on the one hand, to deconstruction, post-structuralism and psychoanalysis. But it is also informed by (mainly US-based) clinical work with survivors of experiences designated as traumatic. This combination of influences can be traced through the contents of Caruth's *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* which includes, alongside chapters by Felman and Laub, contributions by the neuroscientists Van der Kolk and Van der Hart and the literary theorists Georges Bataille and Harold Bloom. One definition of trauma theory suggests that it includes both work around the experience of survivors of the Holocaust and other catastrophic personal and collective

experiences and the theoretical and methodological innovations that might be derived from this work and applied more generally to film and literary studies (*SD*, 194). The clinical work that has shaped trauma theory is informed by a particular and specific type of psychological theory influenced by developments within US psychoanalytic theory and its relation to the categorization of, on the one hand, mental conditions and disabilities, and on the other, the ways in which these categorizations are taken up within the domain of the law (*ST*, 87–90).<sup>4</sup> Critical to these developments has been the codification of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), as demonstrated by the disorder's inclusion and further elaboration in the third and fourth editions of *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* of the American Psychiatric Association,<sup>5</sup> a development referred to in Caruth's introduction to Part I of *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Critical, too, has been the development, particularly in the United States of a neuroscientific approach to memory disorders. In this work, a Freudian emphasis on memory's relations with unconscious conflict, repression and fantasy is replaced by an understanding of memory as related to brain functioning.<sup>6</sup>

Within the Humanities, as stated above, deconstruction was one of the theories which, along with these clinical developments, most shaped the emergence of trauma theory. Its influence can be traced through repeated references to the work of Paul de Man (Caruth's erstwhile teacher) throughout Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* as well as through a chapter devoted to him in Felman and Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. To put things at their simplest, trauma theory appears to help the Humanities move beyond the impasses and crises in knowledge posed by these theories, without abandoning their insights. Trauma theory promises, that is, not a way round the difficulties presented by these theories, but a way through and beyond them. The short sections that follow will critically discuss trauma theory's claims to move through and beyond those theoretical impasses.

### *Referentiality*

If the critiques of referentiality derived from structuralism, post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, semiotics and deconstruction suggest, in their different ways, that representations bear only a highly mediated or indirect relation to actuality, trauma theory moves through and beyond that proposal by suggesting, as Thomas Elsaesser explains,

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that the traumatic event has ‘the status of a (suspended) origin in the production of a representation (. . .) bracketed or suspended because marked by the absence of traces’ (*SD*, 194). In place of theories that emphasize the conventional, mediated, illusory, deferred or imaginary status of the relation between representation and ‘actuality’ or ‘event’, trauma theory suggests that the relation between representation and ‘actuality’ might be reconceived as one constituted by the absence of traces. For Dori Laub, this absence of traces gives rise to his formulation of the aetiology of trauma as ‘an event without a witness’ (*TC*, 75–92) — an absence of witnessing that derives, argues Caruth, from the unassimilable or unknowable nature of the traumatic event (*TEM*, 4; *UE* 1–17).

In trauma theory, this absence of traces testifies to a representation’s relation to (a traumatic) event/actuality. In other words, trauma theory constitutes, in Elsaesser’s words, ‘not so much a theory of recovered memory as (. . .) one of recovered referentiality’ (*SD*, 201). This emphasis on the referentiality of traumatic memory emerges in Caruth’s introduction to the first section of *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, which begins with references to the ‘war in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the increasing violence in the US’ (vii). It is revealed, also, by the centrality accorded by Felman and Laub to Holocaust testimony. This is clearly an interesting and refreshing move that (again, as Elsaesser points out) might be taken up by historians, as well as by media theorists. Yet at the same time, it takes the traumatic *event* as its theoretical foundation. As we have seen, one of Laub’s chapters in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing* refers to trauma as *an event* without a witness. An emphasis on the event is also found throughout Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience*, pre-figured by her opening account of Freud wondering, in his *Beyond The Pleasure Principle*, ‘at the peculiar and sometimes uncanny way in which catastrophic *events* seem to repeat themselves’ (*UE*, 1, emphasis mine). This raises the question of the meaning and implications of placing trauma at the very heart of a *general* theory of representation, which would seem to follow from the centrality to Caruth’s trauma theory of de Man’s general theory of signification. To what extent, that is, are the insights offered by trauma theory generalizable to the whole field of representation? While it might be arguable that language and representation emerge from and bear the mark of that primary break or separation constitutive of subjectivity, to align this break with trauma would constitute, in my view at least, a histrionic manoeuvre resulting in the pathologization of all life lived through language and representation — of all life, that

is, beyond very early infancy. Moreover, the generalizability of trauma theory's insights is brought into question by those very theories from which trauma theory is derived. Trauma theory is derived, in part, that is, from de Man's theory of signification in general, and in part from the neuroscientific studies of psychologists including Bessel A. Van der Kolk, who have argued, in the words of Ruth Leys, that 'the traumatic event is encoded in the brain in a different way from ordinary memory' (*TG*, 7).<sup>7</sup> If trauma's encoding is extraordinary, then can that 'encoding' become the foundation for a general theory of representation? These are questions that deserve further elaboration and debate. For is it that theories of trauma are taken to illuminate the relation between actuality and representation in general, or is it that actuality is beginning to be taken as traumatic in and of itself?<sup>8</sup> These questions, crudely stated as they are here, risk becoming obfuscated, I think, as the theory takes on a life of its own.

### *Subjectivity*

A theory of subjectivity is implicit within trauma theory. One context for this theory is the constant revising and re-reading of Freud's seminal texts, which has resulted, of course, in a plethora of different schools of psychoanalytic and psychological theory. Over-simplifying somewhat, trauma theory as it informs the Humanities has its psychoanalytic foundations in what I'll call the US-based 'postmodernization' of Freud.<sup>9</sup> Here I am referring to neuroscientific work, as represented, for instance, in the work of Van der Kolk and Van der Hart.<sup>10</sup> Alongside an emphasis on memory and brain function, this 'postmodern' psychology includes also a strand that emphasises intersubjectivity and the role of the listener or witness in the bringing to consciousness of previously unassimilated memory.<sup>11</sup> The importance of witnessing is illustrated particularly in Felman and Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing*, which moreover includes the term witness or witnessing in the titles of four of its seven chapters. Though, as Antze has pointed out, an emphasis on narrative, witnessing, and the intersubjectivity of memory is at odds with the scientificity of neurobiology (*TOI*, 97), in practice, trauma theory's emphasis on witnessing as well as on pathologies of dissociation demonstrates that it draws on both strands.

To date there has been little discussion or debate concerning either the model of subjectivity implied by trauma theory, or the theoretical difficulties negotiated by that model. What is it, in other words, that trauma theory moves 'through' or 'beyond' in its construction of a

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traumatized subject? My response to this question takes as its starting point Ruth Leys's excellent genealogical study of trauma, in which Leys demonstrates that contemporary trauma theory is still struggling to resolve a contradiction that has underlain the US-based theories of trauma since their inception — the contradiction, that is, between a mimetic and an anti-mimetic theory of trauma. Leys accords a position of centrality, within trauma's genealogy, to '*the problem of imitation, defined as a problem of hypnotic imitation*' (TG, 8; original emphasis) and makes the case that the hypnotized subject provided the template for early psychoanalytic theories of traumatic memory. Leys points out that far from being only a method of research and treatment of the symptoms of trauma,

Hypnosis (...) played a major theoretical role in the conceptualisation of trauma (...) because the tendency of hypnotized persons to imitate or repeat whatever they were told to say or do provided a basic model for the traumatic experience. Trauma was defined as a situation of dissociation or 'absence' from the self in which the victim unconsciously imitated or identified with the aggressor or traumatic scene in a situation that was likened to a state of heightened suggestibility or hypnotic trance. (TG, 8–9)

Leys goes on to suggest that this tie between trauma and mimesis proved troubling as it threatened the ideal of individual autonomy and responsibility (TG, 9). The notion of subjects absent from themselves and involuntarily mimicking a past traumatic experience threatened to de-stabilize the sovereignty of those subjects. In the mimetic theory of trauma, that is, traumatized subjects are neither fully in control of nor in charge of themselves. As Leys explains, the unwelcome implications of the mimetic theory of trauma led to the development, alongside that theory, of 'an *anti-mimetic* tendency to regard trauma as if it were a purely external event coming to a sovereign if passive victim' (TG, 10; original emphasis). According to this model, the production of memories is no longer understood to be linked to the unconscious, unbiddable, processes of the inner world. Instead, memories are understood to be the unmediated, though unassimilable records of traumatic events. These memories are understood to undergo 'dissociation', meaning that they come to occupy a specially designated area of the mind that precludes their retrieval. Whereas in the mimetic theory, trauma produces psychical dissociation from the self, in the anti-mimetic theory, it is the record of an unassimilable event which is dissociated from memory.

Ruth Leys's genealogy of trauma links the rise of an anti-mimetic theory of trauma to the defence of an (ideological) commitment to the sovereignty and autonomy of the subject. This linkage illuminates what may be a problematic aspect of that US-based trauma theory that is currently being imported into the Humanities in the UK and elsewhere. For Ruth Leys, the ideological-political implications of the anti-mimetic tendency within early formulations of trauma theory are clear: its advantage was that it allowed the traumatic subject to be theorized as *sovereign*, if passive. As Leys goes on to argue, it is this anti-mimetic theory which 'suppressed the mimetic-suggestive paradigm in order to re-establish a strict dichotomy between the autonomous subject and the external trauma' (*TG*, 9).

For Leys, mimetic and anti-mimetic tendencies cannot be strictly divided from each other. It is rather that the contradiction between these tendencies has continued to shape psychology and psychoanalysis. Leys argues that 'from the moment of its invention in the late nineteenth century the concept of trauma has been fundamentally unstable, balancing uneasily — indeed veering uncontrollably — between two ideas, theories or paradigms' (*TG*, 298). Nevertheless, it is possible to read tendencies towards the mimetic or anti-mimetic paradigm in theories of trauma. The trauma theory of Caruth and of Felman and Laub emphasizes lack of recall and the unexperienced nature of trauma. In these senses, it leans towards the mimetic paradigm. However, trauma theory's previously discussed emphasis on the event itself links it clearly with the anti-mimetic theory of trauma. Leys argues that whereas in the mimetic theory, the subject unconsciously imitates or repeats the trauma, in the anti-mimetic theory the subject is 'essentially aloof from the traumatic experience (. . .). The anti-mimetic theory is compatible with, and often gives way to, the idea that trauma is a purely external event that befalls a fully constituted subject' (*TG*, 299). This anti-mimetic tendency shapes Caruth's interpretation of Freud's writings, which return, always, to trauma's relation to an event. Thus, she argues, for instance, that 'the experience that Freud will call "traumatic neurosis" emerges as the reenactment of *an event* that one cannot simply leave behind' (*UE*, 2; emphasis mine).

Leys's account of the differences between the anti-mimetic and mimetic paradigms also draws attention to the question of the traumatized subject's relation to the aggressor. Whereas the mimetic paradigm 'posits a moment of identification with the aggressor (. . .) the anti-mimetic theory depicts violence as purely and simply an assault from



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without. This has the advantage of portraying the victim of trauma as in no way mimetically complicitous with the violence directed against her' (*TG*, 299). The possibility of an identification *with* aggression is markedly absent from the trauma theory of Caruth and Felman and Laub, thus demonstrating further their theory's alignment with the anti-mimetic paradigm and the distance between their trauma theory and the theory that I wish to advocate below.

Trauma theory's readings of Freud contrast on several points with contemporary re-readings of Freud undertaken largely in Europe by recent interpreters including, in the UK, those of Object-Relations theorists,<sup>12</sup> and in France, Laplanche and Pontalis.<sup>13</sup> Whether they follow Object-Relations, or Laplanche, or post-Freudian theory more generally, the psychoanalytic theories of trauma that I wish to advocate here all emphasize unconscious conflict and mediation in the formation of neuroses, even where what appears to be at stake is the relation between a neurosis and memory of the past. These alternative approaches to trauma substitute for trauma theory's emphasis on the dissociation of unassimilated memories, a focus on the traumatic nature of unconscious associations. Trauma theory's topography of the inner world dispenses with the layering of conscious/subconscious and unconscious, substituting for them a conscious mind in which past experiences are accessible, and a dissociated area of the mind from which traumatic past experiences cannot be accessed. In Caruth, and in Felman and Laub, it is the unexperienced nature of the event, which give rise to PTSD. Caruth argues, for instance, that '[w]hat returns in the flashback is not simply an overwhelming experience that has been obstructed by a later repression or amnesia, but an event that is itself constituted, in part, by its lack of integration into consciousness' (*TEM*, 152).

Depth has no intrinsic value, but trauma theory's revised, depthless topography of the mind entails the abandonment of Freud's emphasis on the mediating role of *unconscious processes* in the production of the mind's scenes<sup>14</sup> and meanings, including those of memory. What is lost — to put this even more baldly — is that fundamental psychoanalytic assumption concerning the challenge to the subject's *sovereignty* posed by the unconscious and its wayward processes<sup>15</sup> — processes which might include, but should not be limited to, an identification with the aggressor. In alternative re-interpretations of Freud, it is the unconscious production of associations to a memory, rather than qualities intrinsic to certain events, that is understood to render a memory traumatic. These associations have to be understood in

relation to temporality and fantasy. Whereas for Caruth, it is the memory of the event itself which arrives belatedly (see, for instance, *TEM*, 4; *UE*, 17), for Laplanche and Pontalis, it is the *meanings* conferred on it ‘afterwards’ that may render a particular memory traumatic (*LP*, 467–8). Leys makes a similar point when she argues that ‘for Freud traumatic memory is inherently unstable or mutable owing to the role of unconscious motives that confer meaning on it’ (*TG*, 20). In the psychoanalytic theory that has developed in parallel to that drawn on by trauma theory, then, a memory becomes traumatic when it becomes associated, later, with inadmissible meanings, wishes, fantasies, which might include an identification with the aggressor. What I take from this is that it is not an event, which is by its nature ‘toxic’ to the mind, but what the mind later does to memory. One British Object-Relations psychoanalyst has described this process in the following terms:

Whatever the nature of the event (. . .) eventually he comes to make sense of it in terms of the most troubled and troubling of the relationships between the objects that are felt to inhabit his internal world. That way the survivor is at least making something recognisable and familiar out of the extraordinary, giving it meaning. (*UT*, 12)

It follows from this, as clinical researchers at the Tavistock Clinic have recently documented, that the traumatization effect does not appear to reside in the nature of the event. Some need no support after a so-called trauma, while others need help.

Trauma theory’s sophistication and its associations with radical academic work have become taken-for-granted. Yet it is a theory which, on Leys’s account, implies a ‘forgetting’ of that radical de-centring and de-stabilization of the subject—that emphasis on the subject’s *lack of sovereignty* and its unconscious processes of mediation and meaning-making—which continue to be central to those theories with which trauma theory is still associated in the Humanities today. It hardly needs re-stating that those theories—psychoanalysis, structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction—whose aporias trauma theory promises to negotiate, or move *through*, all problematize, in different ways, and to different degrees, those very notions of autonomy and sovereignty which lie at the heart of bourgeois constructions of subjectivity. It is paradoxical, then, that contemporary trauma theory’s anti-mimetic emphasis on catastrophic events can thus arguably be traced back to a theoretical shift made in

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defence of a model of subjectivity critiqued by the very theories — structuralism, post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction — with which trauma theory in the Humanities is explicitly associated and *through* which, rather than against which, its exponents believe themselves to be travelling.

One of the foundational insights brought to the Humanities by psychoanalysis, for instance, concerned the subject's unconscious activities of condensation, displacement and symbolization. This insight enabled the Humanities to develop a model of the subject not as passive yet sovereign, but as engaged in processes of desire and meaning-making over which it lacked full conscious control. This model of a de-centred subject caught up in processes of symbolization, desire and fear that lie partly beyond the reach of consciousness has been central to the development of contemporary understandings of the production, negotiation and mediation of culture. The significance of these arguments for any discussion of trauma theory's value for the Humanities resides in trauma theory's abandonment of any emphasis on the radical ungovernability of the unconscious. In trauma theory, it is the event rather than the subject, which emerges as unpredictable or ungovernable. I make this point not in the interest of diverting attention from the actuality of historical catastrophes and the suffering caused, but to stress that cultural theory needs to attend to the inter- and intra-subjective processes through which meanings are conferred, negotiated and mediated. The exploration of hidden, unconscious processes of desire or fear-driven meaning-making have proved immensely valuable in cultural theory's engagement with psychoanalysis to date. Dissociation retreats from this insight since, in place of those ungovernable processes of the mind that are constitutive of meaning and affect, it substitutes an event's inassimilable nature. In this new trauma theory it is the nature of the event itself which prompts its dissociation.

Something else gets lost, too, in trauma theory's retreat from the significance of unconscious process to the process of memory formation and revision. An emphasis on the centrality of unconscious process to all aspects of psychical life has the effect of reminding readers and analysts of two important aspects of that life. First, a fundamental tenet of psychoanalysis is that of a continuum of psychical states. Psychoanalysis avoids any radical differentiation between the 'normal' and the 'pathological'. Trauma theory, on the other hand, does tend to distinguish between the 'normal' and the 'pathological'. One has either been present at or has 'been' traumatized by a terrible event

or one has not. Second, whereas psychoanalysis takes the ‘darker side of the mind’ for granted, emphasizing the ubiquity of inadmissible sexual fantasies, for instance, trauma theory suggests, rather than the ‘darkness’ comes only from *outside*. Hence the relevance of Leys’s already noted comments concerning the anti-mimetic paradigm’s ‘depiction of violence as purely and simply an assault from without’ (TG, 299). This perspective has recently been challenged by Caroline Garland, who, writing of the difference between perspectives on trauma in the US and at the Tavistock Clinic in London, emphasises that the Tavistock Clinic’s view is that

[I]n the internal world there is no such thing as an accident, there is no such thing as forgetting and there is no such thing as an absence of hatred, rage or destructiveness (...) in spite of the urge in survivors to attribute all badness to the world outside them that caused their misfortune. (UT, 5)

What I’m suggesting, then, is that notwithstanding the sophistication of trauma theory’s underpinnings in De Manian or Derridean deconstruction it nevertheless offers a theory of the subject which retreats from psychoanalysis’s rejection of a black-and-white vision of psychical life to produce a theory which establishes clear, not to say Manichean binaries of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, ‘trauma’ and ‘normality’, and ‘victims’ and ‘perpetrators’.

Ruth Leys explains that Cathy Caruth’s work is informed by that of the deconstructionist theorist Paul De Man, characterizing Caruth’s position as a

deconstructive version of Van der Kolk’s neurobiological account of trauma [in which] the gap or aporia in consciousness and representation that is held to characterize the individual traumatic experience comes to stand for the ‘materiality of the signifier’. (TG, 266)

Trauma theory, then, arguably moves through and beyond the ‘revelation’ of the subject’s incoherence or ‘de-facement’. It moves through and beyond modernity’s supposition of a coherent, autonomous, knowing subject, but without simply rendering subjectivity *incoherent*, unknowing, fragmented. But perhaps it does this (as Leys suggests) while holding, in a relatively hidden way, to a notion of a sovereign yet passive subject. Is this the route *through* ‘post’ theories that trauma theory is really producing? And is this a model of subjectivity which, if made explicit, would be followed by those who espouse the theory? And if Humanities theory is beginning to substitute a passive but sovereign subject, for a subject caught up in processes not all of

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which are available for conscious control, how might that shift best be contextualized and evaluated? These are, I think, questions that invite further consideration.

*Subjectivity, Forgetting and Testimony*

The subject of trauma theory is characterized by that which it does not know/remember (*UC*, 4–7; *TEM* 1–5). This is not a subject caught up in desire, but a subject constituted by forgetting. The inner world of the traumatized subject is characterized not by repression of unacknowledgeable fantasies but by dissociated memories — traceless traces. Though the subject of trauma theory cannot be restored to coherence through acts of remembrance, a *belated* acknowledgement of that which has been forgotten is a possibility (*TEM*, 4). The traumatized subject can remember its having forgotten, if you like — can acknowledge the gaps and absences. Most importantly, this act of ‘recovery’ takes place in relation to a *witness*. Testimony, as the title of Felman and Laub’s seminal text confirms and as Caruth demonstrates (see specially *UC*, 108), is a term foregrounded in trauma theory. It refers to a relation of witnessing between the subject of trauma and the listener. According to Felman and Laub, testimony (to trauma) demands a witness and it is only within the context of witnessing that testimony to trauma is possible. In this relation, some testimony can be made to trauma’s ‘traceless traces’. What needs emphasizing here is trauma theory’s moving beyond modernity’s coherent, autonomous, knowing subject to a model of subjectivity grounded in the space *between* witness and testifier within which that which cannot be known can begin to be witnessed. This may seem to contradict my earlier argument concerning trauma theory’s re-institution of subjective sovereignty. However, the model of subjectivity inscribed in theories of testimony conforms to Leys’s description: the knowledge this subject lacks is not that of its own unconscious process, but of an *event* that cannot be remembered.

In trauma theory, then, it is almost as though the topographical flattening out of the psyche that substitutes dissociation for repression displaces previously intra-psychical processes of displacement into the space of the inter-subjective. Processes of dialogic meaning-making between testifier and witness arguably take the place, that is, of those intra-psychical yet socially shaped unconscious processes of repression, mediation and meaning-making foregrounded in psychoanalysis’s alternative understanding of traumatic memory.<sup>16</sup>

*History*

The foregrounding of questions of testimony and witness establish trauma theory's pertinence to the discipline and practice of history. Trauma theory is associated with the 'turn to memory' in history as well as in the Humanities more generally. Postmodernism's problematizations of grand narratives, objectivity, universality and totality prompted a turn to memory's partial, local and subjective narratives. Moreover, postmodernism's questioning of history's authoritative truth-claims arose, in part, in relation to a consideration of the Holocaust, the impact of which has been linked to the impossibility of both representation and remembrance. It is telling, therefore, that Shoshana Felman writes towards the beginning of *Testimony* that Adorno's famous dictum concerning poetry after Auschwitz did not imply that poetry could no longer and should no longer be written, but that it must write 'through' its own impossibility (*TC*, 34). By analogy, trauma theory arguably constitutes one attempt by history to think itself 'through' a post-Auschwitz world. If history was already arguing, that is, that events were always 'without a witness'—in that though events happened, they could only be known 'afterwards' through representation, through language, through the always partial and situated discourses and languages of their telling, trauma theory constituted the 'limit-text' of this position—since to use Hayden White's problematic term, 'holocaustal' events 'cannot be simply forgotten (. . .) but neither can they be adequately remembered'.<sup>17</sup> Trauma theory attempts to move through this position in a number of ways: through theories of testimony, as exemplified in the work of Felman and Laub (*TC*), through reaching for modes of representation better suited to the 'unrepresentability' of trauma than realism (*ME*), and by deploying psychoanalytic understandings of trauma's belatedness to reveal testimony *to* trauma's traceless traces 'after' the event.

History's attempt to think itself through a 'post-Auschwitz' world and the links between this attempt and the challenges posed to history by 'post' theories more generally all led it, then, in the direction of memory—and traumatic memory in particular (*ST*, 81–90). The take-up within history of perspectives informed by theories of testimony and trauma arguably evidences that tendency to retain a model of the subject as the sovereign yet passive 'victim' of events found in trauma theory more generally. This is perhaps understandable, given history's primary concerns with deeds and happenings. Yet contemporary history's dominant tendency to link

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or oppose history to memory, to the near exclusion of other terms including fantasy and the imaginary,<sup>18</sup> does invite some discussion.

*Analysts and Readers: The Ethics and Politics of Trauma Analysis*

Theories of trauma, testimony and witnessing are currently informing literary, film and media studies. This work shares in common a drive to engage with and reveal trauma's 'traceless' (*SD*, 199) or absent textual presence. Usually, though not always, taking as their objects texts explicitly concerned with personal or collective catastrophe, trauma analysis aims to demonstrate the ways in which texts may be engaged with the belated remembrance of trauma. There is much that remains to be decided concerning the theories and methods of trauma analysis. For instance, trauma analysis has yet to debate how, given trauma's unrepresentability, the initial choice of texts for analysis is to be made, and whether it can be assumed, as criticism to date seems to have accepted, that it will be texts explicitly concerned with catastrophe that are most likely to reveal trauma's absent traces. Yet, though there is much that remains to be debated concerning every aspect of trauma analysis, the open debate of trauma analysis's grounding theories, and of the readings that it produces are hindered by the nature of the material itself and the contexts — particularly in conferences — within which it is discussed. Criticism and debate can easily appear callous, or even unethical, in a context where an audience is being asked to bear witness to unspeakable sufferings. This can lead, however, to a silencing of discussion which leaves hanging any number of questions about the continually problematic nature of academic discussion of trauma and the apparent acceptability of debate only of certain types of material and not others. Yet if self-reflexivity is a *sine qua non* of all cultural analysis, then there are three aspects of trauma analysis that do invite some reflection: first, the construction of and positioning of the trauma text's analyst; second, the fascinations of trauma and, third, the designation of the field to be included by trauma analysis.

Though trauma analysis is in its early stages of development, its ethical imperatives do appear to have been accepted: trauma analysis positions itself by analogy with the witness or addressee of testimony to trauma and understands its task as that of facilitating the cultural remembrance and working-through of those traumas whose absent presence marks the analysed text/s. That compassion constitutes a central drive of trauma analysis is beyond dispute. Yet what needs to be reflected upon is the tendency of trauma analysis to foreground

the analyst's sensitivity and empathic capacities. In this regard, trauma analysis arguably revises that Leavisite emphasis on fineness of response that was the butt of such extensive critique within the theories from which trauma theory appears to draw breath. Carolyn Steedman's comments on the historical genealogy, particularly in the eighteenth century, of what she calls 'Empathy Theory'<sup>19</sup> provide a timely corrective to the view that the display of empathy, in cultural criticism, is simply to be welcomed:

Using [empathy] theory, a sense of self (...) was articulated, through the use of *someone else's story* of suffering, loss, exploitation, pain (...). In those moments of vibrating reception, when the heart throbs in sympathy and we are sublimely aware of the harmony of our reactions with those of the person we are sympathising with, it seems necessary, an absolute rock-bottom line of exchange, that he or she who tells the harrowing tale, is diminished by *having* that story to tell; and is subordinated in the act of telling. (*FA*, 34)

Steedman's timely remarks invite a greater degree of reflexivity concerning the ethics of trauma criticism. For what she reveals is that critical 'empathy' is not without its darker aspects. As well as partaking of a discourse of power that establishes the critic's sensibility as 'finer' than that of nameless others, the empathetic recovery of the voices of traumatized testifiers and texts may be at the expense of those for whom trauma criticism claims to speak. In this context, it is perhaps salutary to be reminded, also (as the insights of psychoanalysis of any hue would demonstrate), 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,<sup>20</sup> or a drive to voyeurism and control.<sup>21</sup> Such responses have been identified amongst those only indirectly caught up in actual disasters. As David Alexander, director of the Aberdeen Centre for Trauma Research, recently pointed out, trauma sites and trauma victims frequently become the objects of voyeuristic, or triumphalist fascination.<sup>22</sup> Through such manoeuvres, those not directly affected by a catastrophe shield themselves from the awareness of what might have been by means of sadistic fantasies of control and/or blame. At the same time, trauma sites, victims and texts also proffer the potential for a masochistic identification with victimhood. Trauma analysis might gain from considering the possibility, then, that its impetus to engage with trauma may be shaped, to some degree, by these less easily acknowledgeable fascinations.



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There is one sense in which trauma analysis's investment of power in the analyst or reader is explicit. Trauma theory emphasises the dialogic nature of testimony. Yet notwithstanding its analogous relation to testimonial witnessing, trauma analysis appears to dispense with the insights of contemporary media and literary studies concerning the complex processes of meaning negotiation that take place between texts and their various spectators/readers, and invests the analyst with immensely and conclusively authoritative interpretative capacities. It seems that it is the analyst, and the analyst alone, who is able to discern trauma's absent traces. In this regard, trauma theory seems to return us to an almost Althusserian moment, in which the authoritative analyst alone is invested with the capacity to perceive the truth of representation. This scenario diverges considerably from that of the opening up of texts to multiple, contestable, divergent or contradictory readings that have been bequeathed to the Humanities by readings informed by, for instance, psychoanalysis and deconstruction. It diverges, too, from the stress placed by cultural studies on the situated, local and multiple readings of historically specific readers and audiences. To put it this way, for whom, when, where and in what circumstances are particular texts read or experienced as trauma texts?

A further and related question that remains hanging, due to the difficulty of debating trauma analysis, hinges on which events, experiences and texts are to be classed as traumatic and which are to be excluded from this category. This is problematic since, to put things at their most stark, trauma criticism arguably constructs and polices the boundary of what can be recognised as trauma — a position made all the more powerful by trauma theory's insistence on the 'tracelessness' or invisibility of trauma to all but the most trained of eyes. It should be obvious by now that the thrust of my argument is not that the boundaries of trauma criticism's reach should be expanded, but rather that questions remain concerning the inclusions and exclusions performed by this criticism. Why is it, for instance, that there has been so little attention, within trauma theory, to the recent sufferings of those in Rwanda, in comparison to the attention that has been focused on events in the US on 9/11? The questions of firstly, who it is that gets claimed by trauma theory, and who ignored, and secondly, which events get labelled 'trauma' and which do not have not been omitted, entirely, from critical commentary. For example, writing of 9/11, James Berger has recently pointed out that 'events of comparable and greater devastation in terms of loss of life happen in other parts of the world quite regularly',<sup>23</sup> yet, he implies, have not been subject

to trauma criticism's empathic attention. Berger makes the point that while some events get labelled traumatic, others, quite patently do not. Moreover, it is the sufferings of those categorized, in the West as 'other', that tend *not* to be addressed via trauma theory—which becomes in this regard, 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. This is not, as I have already argued, a call to extend trauma's reach—it is rather a call to attend to this aspect of the politics of trauma theory.

Steedman's essay on the making and writing of the self from the seventeenth century onwards offers some thoughts on testimony that are, in the context of these questions, both pertinent and potentially salutary. In Steedman's account, the realist novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries constructed subjectivity—constructed the bourgeois autobiographical I—through two processes of 'colonization'. These novels constructed subjectivity, using as a template the forced courtroom testimonies of subordinate others. These testimonies were then 'taken over' in the first-person writings of the middle classes, who modelled their 'I' on these induced autobiographies. Further, Steedman suggests, as we have already seen, that where, in novels of this period, the narrative dwells on the experiences of an 'other', the narrator and reader place themselves in the position of feeling and displaying the fineness of their response to these tales of suffering. But if, as Steedman suggests, these autobiographical acts construct their subjects through a 'colonization' of the stories of others, which also become the means by which the sensitivity of the narrating and reading subject is produced, perhaps contemporary trauma criticism's exclusions reveal that there are some 'others' who are not even worthy of such colonization. In this light, the question of trauma criticism's exclusions and inclusions becomes both more pressing, yet increasingly complex. For to be included *within* trauma criticism's reach may be to become subject *to* its drive to construct an empathic listening subject and a subjectivity modelled on those narratives to which it attends. Yet those whose excessive otherness excludes them from trauma criticism's incorporative drives also find themselves beyond trauma criticism's empathic reach.

Trauma criticism has no greater claim to ethical purity than any other critical practice. Like any other intellectual endeavour, it is driven by a complex interweaving of scholarly, academic, political and psychical imperatives. Yet trauma criticism has emerged at a time when the capacity to sustain an awareness of ethical equivocalness in

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the West, at least, appears attenuated, and when the cultural mood, policies and analyses proffered by politicians and the media verge on Manicheanism. The rule of Manicheanism can be glimpsed, I think, in responses to 9/11. Nancy Miller, commenting on the 'Portraits of Grief' series run post 9/11 in the *New York Times*, remarked that the stories told in this series were always of fulfilment, happiness, and kindness:

I can't say I cried reading these portraits. On the contrary, I often experienced a powerful sense of disbelief (. . .); was it possible that no one who died in the attack on the WTC was ever depressed (. . .) self-centred (. . .) without a passion (. . .) had a career that seemed stalled (. . .) or sometimes found life not worth living? (*TAH*, 46)

Miller points to and critiques that Manicheanism which underpins the culture within which trauma theory has gained ground — a culture of pure innocence and pure evil and of 'the War against Evil'.

As Berger has pointed out, in the contemporary West, the framing that follows on from the utter uncertainty produced by catastrophe names the time of that catastrophe as apocalyptic, and heralds a 'world said to be clarified and simplified — a struggle of good versus evil, civilization versus barbarianism [. . .]. Are you with us or against us' (*TAH*, 56). If scholarship is to move beyond, rather than mirror such defensive responses, in times when they appear to have become ubiquitous, it needs to sustain rather than retreat from an awareness of both ambiguity, and of the inevitability of ethical impurity. Trauma theory needs, that is, to act as a check against, rather than a vehicle of the Manichean tendencies currently dominant within western politics and culture.

## NOTES

- 1 Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York and London, Routledge, 1992), hereafter abbreviated in text as *TC*; Cathy Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), hereafter abbreviated in text as *TEM*; Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), hereafter abbreviated in text as *UE*.
- 2 Susannah Radstone (ed.), 'Special Debate: Trauma and Screen Studies', *Screen* 42:2 (Summer 2001), 188–216 (hereafter abbreviated in text as *SD*). I wish to take this opportunity to fully acknowledge the value and promise of trauma theory, given Jane Kilby's representation in a recent review article of

my work as an outright and hostile rejection of trauma studies for moving away from the Freudian emphasis on the significance of fantasy within the inner world (Jane Kilby, 'The writing of trauma: trauma theory and the liberty of reading', *New Formations* (Summer 2002), 217–30, hereafter abbreviated in text as *WT*). Nevertheless, while I do accept that trauma theory constitutes a significant new development within the humanities, I also argue that it carries with it a number of risks, which I go on to outline in this essay. For my own other writings on trauma theory, see Susannah Radstone, 'The war of the fathers: fantasy, trauma and September 11<sup>th</sup>', in *Trauma at Home*, edited by Judith Greenberg (Lincoln and London, Nebraska University Press, 2003), 117–23; Susannah Radstone, 'The war of the fathers: trauma, fantasy and September 11', *Signs* 28:1 (Autumn 2002), 457–9; Susannah Radstone, 'History and Trauma: Reviewing *Forrest Gump*', in *Between the Psyche and the Polis: Refiguring History in Literature and Theory*, edited by Michael Rossington and Anne Whitehead (Aldershot, UK and Burlington, USA, Ashgate, 2001), 177–90; Susannah Radstone, 'Social Bonds and Psychological Order: Testimonies', *Cultural Values* 5:1 (January 2001), 59–78 (hereafter abbreviated in text as *SB*); Susannah Radstone, 'Screening Trauma: *Forrest Gump*, Film and Memory', in Susannah Radstone (ed.), *Memory and Methodology* (Oxford and New York, Berg, 2000), 79–107 (hereafter abbreviated in text as *ST*).

- 3 The title of Kilby's article includes the term, and Thomas Elsaesser, 'Post-modernism as mourning work', in *TD*.
- 4 See also Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2000), especially Chapter 7 (hereafter abbreviated in text as *TG*); Michael Kenny, 'Trauma, time, illness and culture: an anthropological approach to traumatic memory', in *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, edited by Paul Antze and Michael Lambek (New York and London, Routledge, 1996), 173–98.
- 5 American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, (Washington D.C: American Psychiatric Association), 1994.
- 6 For critical accounts of these developments see Jeffrey Prager, *Presenting The Past: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Remembering* (Cambridge and London, Harvard University Press, 1998); and Paul Antze, 'The Other Inside: Memory as Metaphor In Psychoanalysis', in *Regimes of Memory*, edited by Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin (New York and London, Routledge, 2003), 96–113 (hereafter abbreviated in text as *TOI*).
- 7 Leys references Bessel A. Van der Kolk, Alexander C. McFarlane and Lars Weisaeth (eds.), *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body and Society* (New York and London, Guilford Press, 1996).
- 8 See Susannah Radstone, *SD*, 190.

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- 9 The difference between US and British psychoanalytically informed approaches to trauma is emphasised by Caroline Garland who, writing on clinical approaches to trauma in the work of the Tavistock Clinic in London, explains that: ‘US work (...) is less central than (...) the work of Freud and Klein, believing that the impact of traumatic events upon the human mind can only be understood and treated through achieving with the patient a deep knowledge of the particular meaning of those events for that individual’ (Caroline Garland, *Understanding Trauma: A Psychoanalytic Approach*, Tavistock Clinic Series (London, Duckworth, 1998), 4), hereafter abbreviated in text as *UT*.
- 10 See, for instance, Bessel A Van der Kolk and Onno Van der Hart, ‘Pierre Janet and the Breakdown of Adaptation in Psychological Trauma’, *American Journal of Psychiatry* 146:12 (December 1989), 1530–40. One of the most influential neuroscientific books on trauma has been Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery* (New York, Basic Books, 1992).
- 11 For references to such work see Paul Antze, *TOI*, 110, n. 9. The importance of witnessing is illustrated particularly in Felman and Laub’s *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*.
- 12 Object-relations psychoanalysis developed, mainly in the UK, from the work of Melanie Klein and her followers. In place of Freud’s tri-partite model of ego/id/superego, object relations theorizes the inner world as composed of inner objects and part-objects constituted through the internalization of encounters with the infant’s first carers. This school is associated, in particular, with clinicians working at the Tavistock Clinic in London.
- 13 Jean Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (London, Karnac Books, 1988), hereafter abbreviated in text as *LP*; John Fletcher and Martin Stanton (eds.), *Jean Laplanche: Seduction, Translation, Drives* (London, Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1992).
- 14 The term ‘scenes’—and its relation to and difference from memory—is introduced by Paul Antze in his recent discussion of different psychoanalytic understandings of memory. See Paul Antze *TOI*.
- 15 Paul Antze quotes from Laplanche, who, he says, ‘has coined the term *étrangèreté* (literally “strangeness”) to capture this dimension of Freud’s thought. He equates it with what he takes to be truly revolutionary in psychoanalysis, the “Copernican” idea of a subject whose centre of gravity lies elsewhere, outside consciousness’ (*TOI*, 102–3).
- 16 For a longer discussion of the difference between these two positions see *TG*, 270–92.
- 17 Hayden White, ‘The modernist event’ (hereafter abbreviated in text as *ME*), in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event*, edited by Vivian Sobchack (New York and London, Routledge, 1996), 20.

- 18 There are, of course, historians working outside this tendency, as demonstrated by papers given at the long-standing and ongoing London ‘Psychoanalysis and History’ seminar series organised by Sally Alexander (Goldsmiths College) and Barbara Taylor (University of East London).
- 19 Carolyn Steedman, ‘Enforced Narratives: Stories of another self’ in *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods*, edited by Tess Cosslett et al. (London and New York, Routledge, 2000), 25–39; hereafter abbreviated in text as *FA*.
- 20 For a longer discussion of this point see *SB* (especially 66 onwards).
- 21 For a paper that reflects, from a feminist perspective, on the potential of public witnessing of testimony to invite a powerful voyeuristic gaze see Karyn Ball, ‘Unspeakable Differences, Obscene Pleasures: The Holocaust as an Object of Desire’, *Women in German Yearbook* 19 (2003), 20–49.
- 22 David Alexander, paper presented at the ‘Trauma, Therapy and Representation’ conference, University of Aberdeen, 11–13 April 2003.
- 23 James Berger, ‘There’s No Backhand To This’ in *Trauma at Home: After 9/11* edited by Judith Greenberg (Lincoln NE, University of Nebraska Press, 2003), hereafter abbreviated in text as *TAH*.