



Trauma and Other Historians

An Introduction

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If one practical way to define trauma is to consider it as a chronic inability to access and process catastrophic events, that is, as a systematic and haunting blockage of memory formation and reclamation of past experiences, then historians have an inherent stake in the concept. This basic observation is not new, of course, but until now only historians of the Holocaust have evinced serious and consistent interest in the vast literature on Trauma Studies. Most historians—for example those who work with the distant past, with non-Western societies, or with less extreme historical events—have not had to engage with the historical implications of trauma. In as much as historians use the term, they do so from the lay standpoint that considers trauma as a horrible and tragic man-made event or a natural disaster. In its popular and very elastic usage the event (trauma) and its consequences (always “traumatic”) run the risk of remaining unexplored and largely unexplained, and thus, paradoxically, actually traumatic in the sense of not allowing access to the past. While remaining cognizant of the bland usage of the concept of trauma, the goal of this special issue is to offer a modest commentary on what Trauma Studies can offer to “Other Historians” and, perhaps, on what they can offer in return. The work presented here is of a provisional nature and is the product of a year-long seminar by a diverse group of historians at the Institute of Historical Studies at the University of Texas at Austin and the international conference, “Trauma and History,” that they organized.

Admittedly, we “Other Historians” are latecomers to a subject that became well known with the publication of *The Empire of Trauma*, in which authors Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman remark: “Over the last twenty-five years, trauma has become established as a unique way of appropriating the traces of history and one of the dominant modes of representing our relationship with the past.”¹ Since that publication, the concept of trauma has only grown as a major signifier of our age. A century ago, when the term “trauma” (literally, a wound) was first used in order to describe the symp-



toms of psychic wounding exhibited by victims of railroad accidents, its uncertain usage was restricted to the very margins of the medical establishment. But gradually, during the course of the twentieth century, trauma was recognized as a significant and complex problem and was systematically investigated and theorized by psychoanalysts, psychologists, psychiatrists, and neurobiologists. This long journey passed primarily through the intimate experience of soldiers who experienced a devastating psychic blow from which they only rarely recovered.²

By the early 1980s, after years of deliberating the grave, wide-ranging, and complex psychiatric manifestations of trauma, the medical establishment institutionalized the concept of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).³ The experience of Vietnam veterans was central to the canonization of PTSD, yet, despite its popularization and even its deployment in litigation, its relevance for other victims, such as those who have suffered from rape or child abuse, was very slow to emerge. *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman's 1992 groundbreaking feminist study—indeed a manifesto—helped change that. Hailed immediately as “one of the most important psychiatric works to be published since Freud,” Herman deepened the everyday meaning of trauma as a human condition that affects not only victims of combat (in other words, men) but equally and with an equal degree of suffering, also victims of rape, child abuse, incest, and all forms of battery (in other words, women and children).⁴ Based on her clinical work, she showed how, despite the stark circumstantial differences between these victims, they all suffer from a *mélange* of intruding symptoms such as flashbacks, panic attacks, phobias, and insomnia, as well as anxiety, depression, and heightened emotions such as shame, guilt, and self-loathing. Under the unbearable daily weight of these intruding symptoms, victims succumbed to a vicious cycle of dissociation and repetition.⁵ Yet, for all of its popularization outside the fields of psychology, psychiatry, and the practice of psychoanalysis and social work more broadly, scholars in the humanities, and especially historians, were slow to conceive of trauma as a central problem in the humanities. Or, put differently, mainstream scholars in the humanities had a hard time understanding why, and in which ways, a condition that resides in the psyche of one unfortunate individual should come under their purview. The 1990s brought many academics to reconsider this position. Below is a short historical account of the formation process of Trauma Studies.

The Appearance of Trauma Studies

With the end of the Cold War, repressed collective memories and fragments of experiences once again resurfaced and the concept of trauma acquired an unexpected relevance. The interest in suppressed experiences happened alongside the cultural ascendancy of postmodernity and its built-in conceptual skepticism toward “objective representation.” Although there were

more conceptual tools available to recover and reconstruct lost histories of disenfranchised communities, there was also a great confusion and disagreement about what those histories actually meant. For that reason, the 1990s were marked by the so-called crisis of representation, in which, after two decades of postmodernity, and especially, the decontextualized reading method that became known as Deconstruction, all literary and visual canons (or master narratives) came under a fierce attack for silencing the past experiences of marginalized individuals and communities.⁶ A struggle ensued between those on the postmodern side, who sought to open the text to new forms of reading, meaning, and experiences, and those on the traditional modern side who asked to uphold existing historical procedures pertaining to evidence, realism, and narrative as guarantors of historical veracity (finding truth in the past) and, hence, ethics. This latter camp was quick to point out that the deconstruction (read “destruction”) of narratives and the rejection of the text’s historical context (Derrida’s “there is nothing outside text”) blur the epistemological difference between history and literature and hence usher in a formidable crisis of historical veracity, severe devaluation of testimony, and with it, a full-fledged ethical crisis. Informed by this deep sense of cultural anxiety over the theory and praxis of historical representation, or the very “possibility of history,” the rhetorical question that modernists commonly presented to the champions of postmodernity was the following: What sets the testimony of the Holocaust survivor apart from that of the Nazi tormentor? Or, more radically, how to know Auschwitz?

Rather than being a clash between two opposing camps, in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution* (1992), Holocaust historian Saul Friedländer and nineteen other leading historians, philosophers, and literary and cultural critics explored the crisis of representation with relation to the extremity of the Holocaust. In particular, this group approached historical relativism and veracity through the work of Hayden White, who was also a fellow contributor to the project. The discussion revolved primarily around his book *Metahistory* (1973), in which he argued that historical narratives are modeled on literary structures (linguistic constructs) thus suggesting a weaker form of commitment to historical reality. Once an arcane argument, twenty years after it was first made, in the midst of the crisis of representation, the full meaning of this argument as one that blurs the foundational modern distinction between the historical (truth) and the literary (fiction), became painfully clear.⁷ Many historians vehemently opposed White’s proposition and some wrote passionate rebuttals. For example, British historian of the Third Reich, Richard Evans, was moved to write *In Defense of History*, which highlights in a polemical way his alarm at the postmodern challenge to conventional historical representation, and calls, rather naively, for a rejection of deconstruction, the prime reading method that postmodern thinkers had to offer.⁸ Yet, postmodern approaches to reading and writing historical texts have not gone away and, during the 1980s, White’s modest proposition was further amplified by the works of Michel

Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and many other French critical theorists. Taking American academia by storm, they cast further doubts over the traditional connection between memory, language, historical representation, veracity, and ethics.

If postmodernism takes issue with modernist procedures of representation, the study of trauma not only validates the theoretical assumptions of non-representability but also explains and historicizes them. Indeed, as a new subfield in the humanities, Trauma Studies was established against the backdrop of the rise of critical theory and the above-mentioned debate about the utility and implication of postmodernity. Since trauma is first and foremost a problem involving memory, its theoreticians in the humanities, most of them literary critics, had much to say about the nature of historical representation. Joining the debate from the postmodern side of the divide, literary theorist Cathy Caruth coupled psychiatric work on trauma with critical theory to suggest that rather than eliminating history, an understanding of how trauma affects memory and narrative formation will achieve the exact opposite of historical erasure, namely, its reconstitution. In two powerful books that can best be described as foundational to Trauma Studies, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Caruth put forward a powerful argument that has permanently inscribed the intertwining of questions of history, memory, experience, and narrative.

Following studies in psychiatry, she contended that trauma is a situation whereby the context and circumstances of a catastrophic event collapse into their totality thus rendering the experience frozen in time. Being nontemporal and decontextualized, trauma does not lend itself to representation by the normal procedures of memory, and therefore becomes unclaimed. Since victims of trauma cannot represent or symbolize the originating catastrophic event and (literarily) lack the language—that is, the verbal means to do so—memory is not articulated in the form of a well-integrated narrative, thus rendering historical experiences inaccessible and hence unclaimed. Narration, therefore, is dependent on the ability to retrieve and process painful memories. Caruth's notion of "unclaimed experience" asks scholars to shift their attention from the veracity and specificity of the catastrophic event (its objective ontological status) to the structural possibility of knowing it: that is, to the inner cognitive and temporal mechanisms that underlie historical representation in the first place.

With a similar understanding of trauma in mind, a host of theoreticians such as Shoshana Felman began to examine questions of loss, listening, temporality, and, especially, the problem of witnessing.⁹ The goal of such articulation was therapeutic in nature, aimed at helping traumatized individuals and collectives to find ways of "working through" trauma toward a resolution/new balance in which one can render the past useful once again and reclaim "frozen" experiences. Most importantly for the purpose of this introduction, since the theorization of trauma is structured on a historical

human subject, one who is a product of temporal development, an inability to experience this process due to severe trauma, is, by definition, also a crisis in the realm of the historical itself. This is what makes Trauma Studies particularly relevant to historians and of major theoretical significance in relation to the problem of historical representation.

Expanding Possibilities

Dominic LaCapra was one of the first historians to grasp this potential.¹⁰ In *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (1994), *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (1998), and *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), LaCapra examined the process of historical representation against the most extreme of events, the Holocaust. As Ruth Lays put it: for LaCapra “the Holocaust in particular is the watershed event of the modern age because, uniquely, terrible and unspeakable, it radically exceeds our capacity to grasp and understand it. And since this is so, the Holocaust is held to have precipitated, perhaps caused, an epistemological-ontological crisis of witnessing, a crisis at the level of language itself.”¹¹ Taking after trauma scholars, LaCapra distinguishes two basic positions with regard to trauma: “acting out” and “working through.” “Acting out” occurs in a traumatized person who does not have access to his or her memories and hence is unable to process and claim them. This person is at risk of living in a cycle of dissociation and repetition in which the unclaimed traumatized condition is replicated again and again as, for example, in the case of abused children who form abusive adult relationships. Following Freud, he contrasts “acting out” with a subject that, by means of therapy, “worked through” trauma and was able to claim a painful experience and avoid repetition.

With this in mind LaCapra identifies a major similarity between the therapist who helps the patient “work through” trauma and the historian who works with the testimonies and textual legacy of traumatized subjects. Both are vulnerable to the risk of transference in which they subconsciously assume the perception of the text/victim and thus lose the position from which they can critically and constructively serve as guides for how to reclaim past experiences and work through them. Thus, similar to a therapist, the goal of the historians is to control the transference relationship with the witness/text. This process would result in meaningful and healthy reconstruction of the relation to the past, or narration that is grounded in contextual reading of testimonies and is ethically committed to them. Yet, if the historian/therapist falls victim to transference he or she is likely to identify completely with obsessive repetition of the traumatic past (the “acting out”). With the problem of transference in mind, LaCapra, Caruth, Felman, and many others warn against the dangers of “closed narration” in which, rather than “work[ing] through” trauma as Freud prescribed, the narrator simply reenacts it along destructive symptomatic lines. Such closed narratives only

frustrate the possibility of overcoming painful experiences and establishing a well-integrated historical consciousness.

Saul Friedländer was also preoccupied by the problem of traumatic transference, historical consciousness, and narration. By historical consciousness he meant the articulation of memory; the establishment of meaning, communal identity, and ethical responsibility; and, ultimately, rational communal communication.¹² Yet, unlike the theoreticians of Trauma Studies, Friedländer is a historian who has envisioned his job not so much as theorizing historical representation and trauma but instead as actually writing the history of the Holocaust. A complicating factor is that he is not only a historian but also a Holocaust survivor, that is, a victim.

Moving from the theory of trauma to history writing, Friedländer published two magisterial volumes entitled *Nazi Germany and the Jews* (1997, 2007), which offer a brilliant and new model for historical representation of the Holocaust and other extreme events. As both historian and survivor, Friedländer understands that it is impossible to narrate the Holocaust (and the Third Reich, more generally) as an inherently historical event. That is because the traumatic moment is one in which the context and the event collapse into each other and freeze. Indeed, contemporaries of the Holocaust had difficulty in narrating and in believing what was unfolding around them. Thus, while recording the epistemological crisis of living under Nazism, on many occasions their representation of the event falls under the category of “closed narration.” Theoretically as well as empirically understanding this complexity, Friedländer carefully works to untangle this collapse so that the past could be reclaimed. He has done so by integrating the testimonies of survivors into the broader political, social, cultural, and economic context of Nazism. We can call this process “historicization,” or a quest for historical specificity, in which he reconstructs that which has collapsed, thus setting a new standard for the historical representation of the Holocaust in a manner that buttresses historical veracity rather than undermining it, as opponents of postmodernity fear.¹³ Following Friedländer’s example (for which he received the 2008 Pulitzer Prize as well as numerous other prizes), by the 2000s trauma theory had become a central vehicle by which historians of the Holocaust were thinking about narrative.

Beyond the Holocaust

As a pivotal scholarly field in which literature, literary theory, psychoanalysis, culture, and historiography have coalesced, the close association of Trauma Studies with the Holocaust has not been without its problems. The ethical concerns that brought scholars to focus on limit-events in the first place completely overshadowed the everyday intersectional trauma of people who had suffered prolonged and excessive stress as a result of their

race, sex, class, etc. Writing about queer trauma as a part of everyday life, Ann Cvetkovich has made two interrelated arguments that should also resonate strongly with historians. First, if trauma means an inability to access and assemble memory, then, by implication, this condition is responsible for the inability to create an archive from which one can later “work through” trauma as Friedländer did. This, she argues in her second point, was the case in some notable historical instances such as slavery, where there was an inherent inability as well as a concentrated political effort not to establish an archive in order to erase the historical experience. Yet, most interestingly, this is also the case of the unassembled and erased queer archive, which raises fundamental questions with regard to documentation and what counts as a public culture.¹⁴ Again, she links the absence of the queer archive to a greater silence in public culture and ultimately to the everyday trauma of the sexual Other.

Another powerful critique of the cultural usage of trauma boldly called on scholars to “decolonize trauma.” By decolonizing, Mark Rothberg meant that trauma studies thus far has been “almost exclusively concerned with traumatic experiences of *white Westerners*.”¹⁵ This critique was meant to facilitate exploration of the “question whether trauma provides the best framework for thinking about the legacies of violence in the colonized/postcolonial world.”¹⁶ Thus, taking the powerful racial and cultural category of colonial difference as its subject matter, various scholars have hoped that a global/postcolonial/decolonized field of Trauma Studies might assist in articulating new epistemologies, ethics, and politics, and so, as in the case of the Holocaust, facilitate the construction of new narratives. In contrast with the universal model of historical narrative as a form of collective therapeutic recovery, however, some postcolonial scholars have maintained that the psychoanalytical origins of Trauma Studies are essentially European and as such are structurally inapplicable to non-Western societies.

Rejecting the basic idea that historicizing and recovering catastrophic experiences can yield a healing narrative that would transition societies from colonial trauma to a postcolonial recovery, the best that scholars of postcolonial societies could hope for, they argue, is a better understanding of how violence constitutes traumatic subjectivity. In contrast to historians of the Holocaust, postcolonial scholars suggest a nontherapeutic relation to the past that is structured around the notion of survival rather than recovery.¹⁷ Thus, the intersectional and postcolonial critiques of Trauma Studies are derived from the fact that trauma and modernity seem to function as mutually constitutive categories that are assumed to be universal and hence applicable everywhere. Questioning the universal validity of this assumption, Rothberg’s revisionist effort wishes to open the field of Trauma Studies to new and previously unexplored experiences in which Europe is not the epistemological center of the investigation, such as in cases of slavery, colonization, genocide, and forced migration.

Trauma and Historical Specificity

With this brief history of Trauma Studies in mind, I now wish to turn to the contributions of this issue and illustrate the many ways trauma is a historical condition and not simply a theory that applies to history. Our goal is not to *pathologize* trauma in history and turn medical situations into collective social problems. Neither are we interested in following any systematic scholarly path that would continue the work of Holocaust historians or act on the above-mentioned critique of Trauma Studies. Instead, we offer an experimental exercise by which we appeal to the historical specificity of various events and texts with trauma theory in mind. Thus, in place of a theoretical reading, we salvage historical specificity by foregrounding the relationship between experiences and event/text in specific temporal and circumstantial frameworks. This approach yields two kinds of results. On the one hand it opens events such as the 1900 Galveston hurricane disaster, and canonical texts such as Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, to entirely new interpretations. On the other hand, thinking with trauma in thirteenth-century Provence or late eighteenth-century revolutionary France shows us how human beings dealt with catastrophes prior to the emergence of the modern self and the articulation of trauma as a modern condition.

Indeed, situated at the heart of the tumultuous Hundred Years War (1337–1453), Nicole Archambeau examines how, in the two decades between 1343 and 1363, communities in France's Provence coped with unprecedented levels of man-made violence and natural disasters, as a result of civil war, repeated invasions of murderous mercenary armies, and devastating outbreaks of plague. In particular, these catastrophes critically affected the lives of a single generation, thus raising the questions: How did individuals and their respective communities confront so much stress, insecurity, devastation, and death? What communal resources were created and mobilized in order to heal this unimaginable pain in a pre-modern era when the properties of trauma and the protocol for its treatment were not yet articulated? With these questions in mind Archambeau turns to the particular case of Saint Delphine de Pui Michel, Countess of Ariano.

Specifically, she looks at the testimonies of sixty-eight witnesses who were questioned as part of the papal legal inquest that sanctified Delphine. These canonization inquest testimonies reveal how perpetrators and victims of violence alike approached Delphine in search of healing from the spiritual sickness of violence. By bearing witness to their plight and by telling and retelling their stories, she provided them with a sense of control over the uncertainties of war, plague, and the consequential sense of theological doubt. In doing so, she took what seems to be a principled position against any form of violence.

The victims who sought Delphine's help believed that, because she had God's ear, she could channel God's grace and thus intercede for them outside the hierarchical structure of the church. Believing in her powers, these

followers experienced a profound process of internal transformation that healed body and soul and allowed them to return to their communities. Though they understood their healing as the outcome of a holy and miraculous intervention, a modern clinical assessment of Delphine's "procedures" reveal some striking similarities to the treatment protocol of PTSD: in responding to the mental needs of the sinful, the sick, and the violent, Saint Delphine established a safe environment, built a healing relationship, and provided validation for the victims' stories, which helped them reclaim their experiences and acquire some degree of control over their lives. This process of reclamation assisted her devotional followers in reconnecting with and reintegrating into their communities.

While Archambeau touches on healing the effects of trauma in a religious setting, Ronen Steinberg shows how, in the period of the Enlightenment, the effects of trauma were not processed religiously but by appealing to a rational medicinal field whose scientific authority was used to account for the relationship between body and soul. Studying the extreme violence of the French Reign of Terror (1793–1794), Steinberg asks how the effects of mass violence were conceived of when the language of trauma was not yet available to process these events. How, he asks, are we to address the trauma of political terror in an era that preceded the articulation of psychic trauma and its broad consequences for self and society? What language was deployed to account for the unbelievable suffering of terrified individuals, and what was the common understanding of these traumatic events? With these questions in mind Steinberg's sources tell us that contemporaries of the Reign of Terror believed that the effects of terror were therapeutic and regenerative for the community. This, he argues, should complicate the way we apply the concept of trauma to historical experiences. More importantly, rather than considering the applicability of the modern concept of trauma to the past, we should examine how the age of revolution was instrumental in establishing the discursive conditions for the emergence of the modern theory of psychic trauma.

Continuing with the theme of violence, Federico Finchelstein's contribution takes us to Argentina's Dirty War (1976–1983). In his analysis of this era of state repression, Finchelstein shows how and why the transnational phenomenon of Fascism carried trauma to new geographical and cultural domains. At the center of his explanation is the Fascist culture of violence, which was not simply a political tool for reaching and maintaining power, but an integral part of its constitution and worldview. Indeed, the culture of Fascism celebrated and valorized violence as a generative, purifying, and cleansing practice that makes both self and nation stronger. Regardless of the original European cultural context, the constitutive role that violence had in Fascism migrated with this ideology to new lands thus operating on a transnational level. Being both the cause of trauma and an agent for future traumas, Fascist violence found a new frontier in Argentina where it replicated some of its World War II and Holocaust repertoire.

Deriving his analysis from the chilling testimonies of Jewish survivors in the Argentinian concentration camps, these testimonies uncover a common practice of ritualistic and sacrificial reenactments of the Nazi culture of death and extermination. They clearly illustrate that the trauma of political violence in Argentina was anchored in the contextual universe of Fascism and its worship of violence. Yet, interestingly, the legacy of Fascist violence and its transnational genealogy informed and constituted not only the actions of the perpetrators but also the experience of the Jewish victims who were “returned” to the realities of the Nazi death camps. This classic case of compulsive repetition of ritualistic political violence and, hence, retraumatization, informs Finchelstein’s broader argument about the ways in which Fascism’s traumatic structure becomes so inherent and constitutive that it continues to play a destructive global role even after 1945.

Shifting to postcolonial theories of violence, Emma Kuby revisits two canonical texts of decolonization and the 1960s global culture of resistance and reads them against each other. Both texts deal with the possibilities, benefits, and virtues of anticolonial violence. Historically speaking, Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* and Jean-Paul Sartre’s “Preface” to Fanon’s book were normally read contiguously, with Sartre’s preface, or “The Commentary,” dictating, narrowing, and fixing the pro-violence meaning of Fanon’s entire book. Offering an alternative reading of these works, Kuby breaks the continuum and reads the last—and the least read—chapter of Fanon’s book against Sartre’s commentary. While the commentary celebrates and valorizes anticolonial violence as an act of self-assertion, liberation of the self, and hence emancipation from the colonial condition, Fanon’s chapter uncovers the devastating effects of violence that Algerian fighters suffered because of their heroic resistance. Sartre’s theory of the emancipatory properties of anticolonial violence thus pushes against Fanon’s psychiatric evidence that many of those who took up arms against the French were far from being liberated and emancipated functioning citizens. To the contrary, they became haunted individuals who anonymously suffered from the consequences of their actions.

In her study of post-World War II Dutch society, Jennifer Foray investigates the interplay between two traumatic situations, the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands during the war and the Dutch loss of the colony of Indonesia right after. While every Dutch citizen experienced the Nazi occupation and was personally affected by it, decolonization affected only a small percentage of the Dutch population. Yet, compounded by the humiliating loss of sovereignty in World War II, Indonesian independence constituted a retraumatization in which the collective state of mind following the Nazi occupation was brought to bear on the issue of decolonization. As Foray shows, rather than being processed separately in their proper historical contexts, the two events morphed into a single collective event that was heavily informed by the historical circumstances of postwar famine, cold, and destruction, and the general struggle for survival. Seen as a collective cultural trauma this ar-

ticle shows how this form of collective traumatization is a socially mediated and actively constructed process.

Andy Horowitz examines another type of collective trauma. The hurricane that hit Galveston, Texas, in September of 1900, killed one out of six of the city's inhabitants. It was a powerful natural disaster that devastated a community and destroyed lives and infrastructure alike. With close to ten thousand inhabitants dead, the hurricane constituted a natural disaster that was obviously beyond the control of human beings. Yet, curiously, by properly historicizing this event Horowitz reveals that the real disaster of Galveston was not that of the hurricane but the work of self-inflicted communal violence perpetrated by white vigilantes and militiamen on dozens of African Americans, who were accused of looting and violating public order in Galveston's devastated streets. The article thus illuminates how the specific catastrophe of the Galveston flood was part of the ongoing disaster of racial terror in Texas at the turn of the twentieth century. On the immediate level, the fifteen-foot-high wall of water exposed the suppressed violence that was part and parcel of the Southern racial order, thus exposing the actual trauma of Galveston: the inability to reclaim and account for the experience of white racial superiority.

In another case of memory manipulation Dominic Yang looks at how, in the wake of the Chinese Civil War, the defeated republican army of Chiang Kai-shek in Taiwan repressed the defeat, exile, and loss of mainland China, and hid behind the glory of manufactured resistance, heroism, and sacrifice. In order to expose the collective mechanisms of denial and memory suppression, Yang studies the last stand and ritual suicide of the five hundred martyrs in the city of Taiyuan in mainland China during the Civil War. Commemorated and celebrated for more than five decades as heroes who chose death and glory over a humiliating surrender, the story of Taiyuan and its "martyrs" turned out to be fabricated. Indeed, in the early 1990s, the events at Taiyuan were reconsidered: some of those who allegedly chose death for glory were found alive and well in China and, consequently, the myth of Taiyuan lost its credibility and hence its public utility. With this reconsideration in mind, Yang argues that the inability to process the defeat of 1949—the unspeakability of the events—resulted in symptomatic compulsive and repetitive returns to the events of the Chinese Civil War. The case of Taiyuan, therefore, is just a minor example of the traumatic foundations of Taiwan's national identity in which the functions of consciousness, memory, and perception of the environment are poorly integrated.

Asking with Trauma

In conclusion, we may ask: How useful is the concept of trauma, taken in its entirety? Reading history with trauma in mind is not a straightforward and unproblematic operation. As a careful documentary process of recon-

struction, historical specificity surely has much explanatory power, yet in the context of trauma it is also runs into several methodological problems that we historians normally consider important (and theoreticians consider admittedly less so). For instance, we understand how trauma passes from parent to child and how it runs generationally in a given family. But does the same mechanism work in larger groups such as entire national communities? The psychoanalytical model of trauma is structured on the idea of a well-defined modern subject or self, but does it apply to societies at large? Do collectives exhibit the same symptoms as traumatized individuals, such as intrusion, dissociation, and repetition? Furthermore, if trauma is transferable, can it also migrate across the globe from one society to another? Is it culturally translatable, and, if so, which apparatuses inform and shape this acculturation? What aspects of trauma migrate? Over the years, many of these issues have been approached theoretically.¹⁸ What we learn from the theoretically driven field of Trauma Studies is not how to “apply it to history.” Instead, what we learn is that, whether we realize it or not, history and trauma are intimately intertwined. Because the condition of trauma is that of a crisis in historical representation, we historians should think about the past with this complexity in mind. If we do so we will offer in return a valuable historical reconstruction of that which collapses in the catastrophic moment.

Notes

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1. Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 15.
2. For an intellectual history of the concept of trauma see: Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). See also an important critique of Leys’s evaluation of how literary theorists understood trauma: Dorian Stuber, review of *Trauma: A Genealogy*, by Ruth Leys, *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2002), <http://www.brynmawr.edu/bmrcl/Fall2002/Leys.html>.
3. Allan Young, *The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).
4. Phyllis Chester, “The Shell-Shocked Woman,” *New York Times*, 23 August 1992, 11.
5. Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).
6. For the postmodern argument see: Frank Ankersmit, *Historical Representation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).
7. See the recent analysis of Robert Doran, “Metahistory and the Ethics of Historiography,” *Storia della Storiografia* 66, no. 1 (2014), 135–162.
8. Richard Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999).

9. Shoshana Felman showed how testimony that bears witness to catastrophe can avoid the symptoms of trauma such as close and fragmented narration. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992). A later text dealt with trauma and law: Shoshana Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).
10. The rise of Memory Studies, a field in which historians took the lead and studied the formation process and symbolization mechanisms of collective memory/ amnesia, was another response to the crisis of representation. This effort had several notable achievements that lie beyond the scope of this introduction, yet, by way of criticism historians of collective memory have done so from a very narrow theoretical standpoint that was unaware of the major ways in which trauma constitutes memory.
11. Leys, 268.
12. Saul Friedländer, "Trauma, Transference and 'Working through' in Writing the History of the 'Shoah,'" *History & Memory* 4, no. 1 (1992): 39–59, and Saul Friedländer, "Trauma, Memory and Transference," in *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995), 252–263.
13. Amos Goldberg, "The Victim's Voice and Melodramatic Aesthetics in History," *History and Theory* 48, no. 3 (2009): 220–237.
14. Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
15. Michael Rothberg, "Decolonizing Trauma: A Response," special issue, *Studies in the Novel* 40, nos. 1 & 2, (2008): 227; Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).
16. Rothberg, "Decolonizing Trauma," 226.
17. David Lloyd, "Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery?" *Interventions* 2, no. 2 (2000): 212–228. Jill Bennett and Rosanne Kennedy, eds., *World Memory: Personal Trajectories in Global Time* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
18. For example, on the notion of collective cultural trauma see: Jeffrey Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka, eds., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).