Interrogating trauma: Towards a critical trauma studies

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In a French arthouse film an Algerian man draws out a large kitchen knife and cuts his own throat. In a short Sri Lankan art video the goddess of destruction, Kali, and a woman soldier surface from the ocean and walk towards a small seaside village. Shaky images of a video documentary bear witness to the muddied streets and flooded buildings of a poor, black neighbourhood of the Southern United States. In a low-budget Australian film written and directed by an Indigenous filmmaker two homeless, petrol-sniffing Aboriginal youths walk aimlessly on the streets of an outback town. We encounter the modern world and its history via depictions of catastrophe, atrocity, suffering and death. During the past 100 years or so, traumatic historical events and experiences have been re-imagined and re-enacted for us to witness over and over by constantly evolving media and art forms. Perhaps due to the ubiquity and multiplication of such images and narratives in modern and post-modern culture, questions about the impulse to behold and depict both the suffering of others and of the self, as well as more general questions about the ontological status of the representation of trauma, have increasingly been raised within intersecting, inter-disciplinary fields of study over the past two decades.

However, while these ongoing debates have produced a body of theoretical and testimonial literature of vast dimensions, their focus has been markedly restricted by an interest in the narrative and visual traces of cataclysmic European and US historical events, such as the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, 9/11 and the post-9/11 war on terror. In contrast, substantially less theorization has been devoted, by and large, to the representation of suffering as a result of political conflict outside the West, even though depictions of Third World disasters saturate contemporary media and art around the globe.1 In addition, when critical attention has been given to the latter, largely the same conventional theory of trauma developed in Holocaust and trauma studies, namely a theory of subjective dissociation initially derived from Freudian psychoanalysis, has been used, with only limited attempts to develop alternative conceptualizations applicable to localized, culturally specific representations of suffering.2

Consequently, this collection of essays joins a critical trend in twenty-first-century trauma studies to redress the balance (Blocker 2009; Douglas, Whitlock, and Stumm 2008; Guerin and Hallas 2007; Ball 2007; Winter 2006; Bennett 2005; Hodgkin and Radstone 2005; Tumarkin 2005; Kaplan 2005; Kaplan and Wang 2004; Collins and Davis 2004;

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Bennett and Kennedy 2003; Douglass and Vogler 2003; Huyssen 2003; Eyerman 2001; Weibel and Kaltenbeck 2000; Robben and Suárez-Orozco 2000). Firstly, the collection focuses on media and artistic representations of political conflict and disaster in a diversity of regions around the world. Secondly, it seeks to interrogate the methodological limits of the dominant theory of trauma as a way of critically engaging with diverse expressions and depictions of political conflict and the representation of the personal and social suffering the latter produces.

It is important to clarify at the onset that the phrase ‘interrogating trauma’ in this collection’s title implies neither a sociological nor historical analysis of specific events and experiences of trauma, nor the intent to relativize the past and continuing suffering of human groups around the world as a direct effect of political conflict and violence. Rather, the essays in this collection indirectly consider traumatic histories and experiences by focusing more specifically on a broad range of representations of political conflict and suffering realized through creative arts and visual media. In this sense, the interrogation of trauma alluded to in our title refers more precisely to the examination of the concept of trauma used – often unproblematically – to theorize the cultural representation of human suffering and atrocity.

Furthermore, this collection’s ‘interrogation’ of the significance of the dominant theory of trauma for artistic and media representation does not involve a blind rejection of this theory. On the contrary, most of the contributions assembled here engage in varying degrees with a wide range of uses and applications of the theory of trauma. At the same time, each essay examines the potential limitations of this theory’s use, while considering alternative conceptual and methodological possibilities. The effect of this, we hope, is a critical opening – rather than abandonment or rejection – of the conventional theory of trauma, as a means to facilitate the critical reappraisal of the relationship between cultural representations and their referent in socio-historical processes marked by violence, conflict and suffering.

**Trauma, memory and culture**

Trauma has progressively become a key notion in discussions that interrogate the links between social history, subjective experience, and cultural representation. Several decades ago, humanities scholars became interested in the outcomes of research about traumatic memory conducted within the confines of psychology and psychiatry, with many concepts developed in the mental health sciences being translated into the study of history, society, and culture. Since then, a constantly evolving, multidisciplinary field known as *trauma studies* has grown to great proportions. A broad look at the field of trauma studies shows that while the application of the notion of trauma to the analysis of history, culture and politics is widespread, the methodological distinction between this term’s original psychological denotation and its analogical use in relation to the socio-cultural realm is often ambiguous if not altogether obscure. This is particularly so in debates concerning the representation of trauma in media such as photography and film. In this regard, Robert Rosenstone observes that ‘[u]nlike the word, the filmic image cannot abstract and generalize. The screen must show specific images … not the working class but a specific British family grappling with the problems of depression, unemployment, war, and recovery’ (1995, 8). However, in their specificity, images also possess the capacity to generate abstract meaning and, in fact, more often than not the visual and narrative rendition of the pain of individual characters is interpreted as a synecdoche for the suffering of a people, culture or nation.
Trauma studies has developed in close partnership with memory studies, a field that has also increased its size and influence exponentially in the last couple of decades. Reflecting a broader cultural interest – an obsession some may say – in memory as a phenomenon at once neuronal, psychological, cultural, and socio-political, the academic study of memory has seen scholars from diverse disciplines attempt to understand a subject that constantly challenges the traditional disciplinary boundaries on which academic research is based. Indeed, the past two decades have seen the emergence of hundreds of new publications about memory, not only books and articles but journals and editorial series, as well as seminars, conferences, and both undergraduate and graduate courses. All of them seem to be articulated by a common central focus on the multiple ways in which memory comes to be expressed and known and, more broadly, on how the personal and cultural worlds come to be constituted through memory. A quick look at the contents of many memory studies publications immediately shows that the discussion of trauma, both in its psychological and cultural forms, is a recurrent sub-topic. Conversely, the same can be said for trauma publications, courses and projects where memory normally features as a key category. Thus, this interpenetration of trauma studies and memory studies makes the boundaries of these two fields difficult to draw, and it is, in fact, virtually impossible to separate them out; their underlying difference being more of emphasis than any intrinsic specificity to be delineated from a historical, thematic or methodological perspective.

The fact that trauma studies and memory studies constantly intersect each other is possibly due to an inherent affinity between their subjects: although not all memory is traumatic, trauma generally is described as a kind of memory (from this view, trauma studies would have to be postulated as a department of memory studies). Even though some clinical definitions of trauma stress the traumatic event or experience, as opposed to its aftermath, that is, its belated manifestation, most approaches appear to agree in understanding trauma as a kind of memory. At the same time, most also concur that this is an exceptional form of memory; not a memory formed through symbols and narratives but one closer to the nature of an injury, a fact that is further supported by the Greek etymology of the term *trauma*, which means *wound*. Thus, essentially understood as a form of damage, traumatic memory is often described as a wound: a painful mark of the past that haunts and overwhelms the present. Significantly, it is the analogical physicality of the traces left by the past in traumatic memory – a violent latency of the past in which memory is imagined as a wounded body – that complicates attempts to understand trauma in terms of cultural representation. This is so because trauma’s inherent nature would be to neutralize the habitual processes of symbolization and narrativization through which personal, family and cultural memories and identities are woven.

Initially coined in physical medical science, this notion of a past, latent wound was then analogically transposed to case studies of psychiatric patients, notably in the late nineteenth century. In this way, trauma became a key concept in clinical psychology, particularly in Freudian psychoanalysis, as it analogically described a psychological injury produced by the experience of an external event that damaged the individual’s sense of self, and continued to produce belated negative effects that manifested themselves in the form of involuntary symptoms, for example, as disturbing nightmares and flashbacks. This way of understanding psychological trauma in terms of dissociation (between the subject and its present, conscious experience), due to the pervasive, involuntary irruption of disturbing, incomprehensible memories, thus became hegemonic in psychological discourses of trauma, and greatly contributed to the dominant conception of trauma in a socio-cultural sense.
The adoption and adaptation of the notion of trauma into debates about history and culture between contemporary Western thinkers in the humanities took place at significant moments during the twentieth century, often as a response to the morbid spectacle of war. According to Matthew Sharpe, since ‘the last century as a whole was arguably a century of traumas … [a] sense of trauma, unsurprisingly, pervades much of twentieth century European thought’ (2007, 1). An early and notable case is the reflection on the paradigm-shifting impact of modernity on human life found in the writings of Walter Benjamin. According to Anca Pusca, the German philosopher was not only one of the first to consider the underlying significance of modern trauma, but his assessment of shock, which is for him the basis of trauma, constitutes a revealing alternative to Freud’s negative perspective on it (2007, 346). Nevertheless, the comparatively lesser attention given in the field of trauma studies to philosophical theories on angst, shock and death may perhaps be explained by the greater historical influence that Holocaust studies have so far had on trauma scholars.

The continuing historical and philosophical reflection initiated in the aftermath of the Second World War has seen the field of Holocaust studies reach extraordinary proportions. In fact, in the course of this development, other distinct fields have surfaced from within the depths of the former, for example, the comparative field of genocide studies. Similarly, it is possible to affirm that the emergence of trauma studies occurred when scholars engaging critically with the concept of trauma within Holocaust studies began to apply trauma-related debates – initially elaborated in unique reference to the Holocaust – to other catastrophic historical experiences. Since that development, the 1990s debates about how historical and political events, in particular catastrophic ones, connect with trauma and memory, both at the subjective and cultural levels, have increased in quantity, intensity, and complexity. Thus, the specific study of cultural trauma appears today as a critical, self-reflexive and vastly inter-disciplinary field. Still, what humanities scholars in disciplines that range from history, anthropology and social science to philosophy, cultural studies and media studies have in common is a vested interest in the problems that traumatic memory and its cultural and political expression pose to critical theory at the level of individuals, communities, nations and global networks. The broad range of contributions to this collection is a sign of this expanding diversity.

Cultures of political memory and the limits of the trauma framework

As stated above, this collection’s specific focus is the way in which trauma is – or fails to be – represented, for example, in direct-witness video testimonies, or in photography and narrative film. This is in fact one of the most debated topics in trauma studies, and as such it has triggered a series of productive intersections between trauma studies and other fields, such as studies of literature, visual culture and film. In this context, it is not surprising that the Holocaust, which has been given rapt attention in historical and philosophical works as the key event of twentieth-century history, arguably continues to be the most depicted in literature, art, and screen culture. By the same token, analyses of visual, narrative, poetic and even musical engagements with the Holocaust are by far the most commonly found examples in the critical literature. According to Guerin and Hallas (2007), the emphasis given to the Holocaust in twentieth-century trauma scholarship may be the reason behind the fact that until relatively recently ‘scholars have paid more attention to the written and spoken word as the most appropriate communicative forms for bearing witness to and remembering the suffering of the traumatised subject’ (7). However, it is significant that the sub-field of inquiry into trauma’s representation in visual culture has arguably begun to
displace the traditional attention given to written testimonials and reflections. In this sense, the forms most commonly debated in the field of visual culture studies are sites such as memorials and museums, photography, modern and contemporary arts, the mass media and cinema. Perhaps cinema (film and video included) is the visual form that most often, most vividly and through the most diverse range of approaches has represented and explored the myriad ways in which trauma manifests in subjective experience and culture. Thus, the critical literature on films about the trauma of the Holocaust and, more generally, the Second World War, Vietnam and other European and US wars is, in the first place, copious. However, no less profuse is the developing literature that opens up the inquiry to include cinematic representations of traumatic histories and experiences elsewhere.

In the midst of such abundance of scholarship, it is hardly surprising that the trauma framework is sometimes presented as an all-inclusive master paradigm, a grand model that would fit and fulfil all cases. Needless to say, such an approach is limited. The cultural articulation of the human response to political oppression, abuse, and atrocity (as in colonialism, war, concentration camps, torture, terrorism, and genocide) or other overwhelming experiences, such as intra-family violence (particularly, rape and child abuse) and environmental catastrophes (tsunamis, floods, earthquakes and fires) is not the exclusive territory of trauma studies. It is, as well, routinely approached from alternative disciplinary perspectives: political science, ethics, historical studies, and anthropology, to name just a few. These diverse approaches to what is basically the same matter of study, that is, the cultural representation of human life as troubled by devastation and mayhem, do not necessarily emphasize trauma and suffering, but often focus rather on experiences of survival, resilience, struggle, and recovery. As Andreas Huyssen points out, the preferential focus given to trauma ‘confine[s] our understanding of memory, marking it too exclusively in terms of pain, suffering, and loss [denying] human agency and [locking] us into compulsive repetition’ (2003, 8). Thus, to reduce all representation of memories and experiences marked by conflict, violence and atrocity to trauma is problematic, as it emphasizes a victim position and potentially fails to give due attention to the expression of agency.

Whereas trauma discourses and cultures often constitute the way in which individuals and communities work through their histories and memories of conflict, catastrophe and suffering, at the same time, these histories and memories are often engaged from active positions of political agency. This may involve the articulation of legal discourses that emphasize the establishment of truth and delivery of social and institutional justice, or ethical discourses that stress ideas such as witnessing, recognition, apology, reconciliation, reconstruction and compensation. In this context, cultural representation naturally makes use of all its discursive possibilities, from trauma and healing to truth and justice. Several of the authors in this collection stress cultural processes and expressions that actively work through trauma over those that endlessly insist on acting it out (see, for example, the essays by Felicity Collins and Antonio Traverso).

Towards a critical trauma methodology
The development of a critical methodology for the study of cultural trauma involves the recognition of the fact that the theory of trauma is not a single, homogeneous entity but that, on the contrary, an array of perspectives has been developed within diverse disciplinary traditions. Critical mappings of the field, which disallow the possibility of collapsing diverse concepts of trauma into a single, undifferentiated one, have been undertaken efficiently by many in the field (see, especially, Radstone 2007; Leys 2000).
A précis of the main theoretical and methodological approaches often identified in the vast literature on trauma in the humanities would include the following: concepts of trauma developed in psychoanalysis and, more broadly, psychology; applications of post-structuralist and deconstructive concepts and methods to psychoanalytic and neurological models of trauma; philosophical reflections on historical trauma; psychoanalytic and philosophical concepts of trauma reworked through the discipline of history; and the application of a sociological framework to the understanding of cultural trauma, as a distinct category from psychological trauma. While the differences among these various approaches can be substantial, as pointed out above, often the concept of trauma used in a context of cultural inquiry remains largely undefined. Despite some specific exceptions, uses of the expressions ‘cultural trauma’ and ‘collective trauma’ are generally no more than problematic analogical extensions of medical and psychological trauma concepts. In a relatively recent article, Susannah Radstone, one of the contributors to this collection, critiques the widespread use of a vocabulary developed to describe subjective memory to refer to social and cultural phenomena (2005). The effect of this reifying use of language, Radstone argues, is that it renders as literal ‘what might better be regarded as a series of compelling metaphors – the “traumatisation” of a nation, for instance, or the “healing” of a culture’ (137). At the same time, she stresses, it problematically diverts ‘attention away from the processes of articulation through which past happenings and the meanings and affects associated with them are discursively produced, transmitted and mediated’ (137). In a similar vein, Jay Winter warns against the ‘loose usage of the term “collective memory” [as it has been] framed to mean virtually anything at all – in every corner of the arts and the humanities’ (2006, 4). Thus, the unproblematic use of metaphors of memory and trauma in a cultural context invariably results in the avoidance of the task of elaboration of a more adequate definition of cultural trauma. What does it mean to say that a society or community is traumatized?

Perhaps the most deliberate effort to elaborate a definition of cultural trauma that unambiguously differentiates it from psychological trauma is the sociological model articulated by Jeffrey Alexander and his collaborators (2004). Their constructivist proposition is that, against lay naturalistic understandings of trauma (which, according to Alexander, pervade scholarly accounts, especially psychoanalytically inflected ones), cultural trauma is not the naturally occurring response of a community or society to cataclysmic events. Rather, a culture of trauma is activated by symbolic and imaginative work and, therefore, is separate from the event that may have caused it. In this way, they argue, cultural trauma can be studied in terms of its material and symbolic manifestations in social processes and structures, while remaining separate from the vicissitudes of the traumatic symptoms and experiences of individual sufferers. However, if trauma in its socio-cultural dimension is to be generalized to such an extent as to broadly denote a culture of memorialization whose content refers to specific politicized histories and experiences of human suffering – which nevertheless always involve resilience and struggle as well as trauma – then the use of the term trauma to refer to this culture seems arbitrary. There are, in fact, other established sociological and anthropological models, such as social suffering, conflict, violence and genocide studies, which consider the social and cultural responses of communities to catastrophic events, while avoiding the psychologizing connotations implied by concepts of trauma. Thus, a radical sociologizing and de-psychologizing of cultural trauma is not without its own complications.

In addressing the methodological problem of analogical articulations between concepts of psychological and cultural trauma, Dominick LaCapra radically suggests that
psychoanalysis could be a discourse that has more affinity with the social and cultural realm than with the level of the individual psyche (LaCapra 1994, 173–4). Similarly, Joshua Hirsch, who considers LaCapra’s suggestion, attends to this problem through the category ‘discourse of trauma’, which

as one encounters it in conversation, in reading, in film – gives one a language with which to begin to represent the failure of representation that one has experienced […] It is in the discourse of trauma that we can move from the notion of individual responses to traumatizing events toward the notion of collective responses. (2004, 18)

The present collection, therefore, is animated by a concern with conceptual and methodological issues underlying the critical understanding of historical experiences of conflict and suffering and their remembrance in various forms of collectively, that is, discursively, produced representations.

At a time when important voices in the field (Radstone forthcoming; Bennett 2005; Huyssen 2003) are revealing a movement away from the persistent attention given to traumatic memory in historical and cultural studies at least since the late 1980s, more than ever there is an urgent need to reassess the study of the cultural engagement with historical suffering caused by political conflict, in terms of new inter-disciplinary and inter-cultural methodological perspectives. Thus, this collection of essays seeks to contribute to this movement beyond trauma – not in the ethically and politically unsustainable sense of turning away from a humanistic concern with social suffering and social justice but in the sense of opening up the scope of interpretation most familiar to trauma studies. The contributions to this collection aim at doing just this, by expanding the discussion regarding artistic and media representations of the suffering of people in a diversity of political contexts in South and North America, Southern Asia, Australia and Europe. At the same time, each of the essays that follow takes in its own specific way a more or less pronounced critical, theoretical and methodological distance from the conventional trauma theory, while remaining faithful to the ethical and political concerns of a critical trauma studies.

This ‘Interrogating Trauma’ collection also shows the resolve of scholars in various areas of the study of culture to reinvigorate the interest in trauma representation by revalorizing the use of established disciplinary methodologies of analysis, as well as traditional fruitful collaborations between dissimilar disciplines, such as screen studies, history and anthropology. It also highlights two of the most important critical considerations to be kept in mind when engaging with trauma from within the humanities. Firstly, the perception that trauma studies – or the turn to trauma of many humanities fields primarily concerned with cultural expression – would have allowed a critical (non-naive) return to the real after the detour taken by post-structuralist and post-modern theory. However, implicit in the collection is a call for caution that warns of the risks involved in this perception, in the sense that this return could be just another illusion created by the same metaphysical essentialism that post-structuralism sought to dethrone in the first place. The second consideration alludes to the fact that with its pervasive medical connotations, most probably due to its entrenched origin in the physical and psychological health sciences, the expression trauma continuously tends to psychologize, and therefore, potentially, depoliticize the discussion and analysis of socio-historical phenomena and their representation.

The collection’s first four contributions are those of the scholars who delivered the keynotes at the ‘Interrogating Trauma’ conference in Perth in 2008. In the first essay, ‘Caché: Or What the Past Hides’, Susannah Radstone produces a detailed analysis of Michael Haneke’s Caché (Hidden) (2005) – a film that through a mysterious narrative and
an unfathomable subversion of formal levels addresses the trauma of colonial history, in
particular ‘the dissociated memory of France’s ‘dirty war’ against Algeria’. Radstone uses
her discussion of Haneke’s film as an occasion to invite the humanities to consider Jean
Laplanche’s psychoanalytic theory of the enigmatic signifier as a productive alternative to
dissociative trauma theory in the understanding of the relationship between subjective and
cultural memory. Radstone’s piece is followed by an essay by Suvendrini Perera,
‘Torturous Dialogues: Geographies of Trauma and Spaces of Exception’, which considers
historical, ideological, and geopolitical elements that contribute to the necro-political and
bio-political ordering of suffering and damage – whereby trauma becomes a transactable
currency – in the context of maritime disasters, in particular the Indian Ocean tsunami of
and Fantasies of Belonging after Katrina’, continues the exploration of the underlying
political structures of human suffering in the context of so-called natural disasters by
focusing on the use of testimonial documentary film and video to come to terms with
trauma and devastation in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Felicity Collins’s
essay, ‘After the Apology: Re-framing Violence and Suffering in First Australians,
Australia, and Samson and Delilah’, complements Radstone’s and Walker’s focus on
cinematic media, as well as the critical attention that Perera gives to discursive
construction, by considering media images of remote Aboriginal communities that
normalize violence and the suffering of people positioned as ‘bare life’. Conversely,
Collins argues for the potential of three recent Australian cinematic texts to work through
the traumatic past.

Adam Brown’s ‘Confronting “Choiceless Choices” in Holocaust Videotestimonies: Judgement, “Privileged” Jews, and the Role of the Interviewer’ explores the ethical and
political dilemmas involved in the production of Holocaust video testimonies in cases
where the survivor interviewees were prisoners who held positions involving benefits that
common prisoners did not have. In considering these dilemmas, Brown engages ethical
concepts from Holocaust studies, such as Lawrence Langer’s ‘choiceless choices’ and
Primo Levi’s ‘grey zone’. Moving the attention away from testimonial video and towards
commercial cinema, Mark Straw’s ‘The Guilt Zone: Trauma, Masochism and the Ethics of
Spectatorship in Brian De Palma’s Redacted (2007)’ provides an analysis of this
controversial Iraq War veteran film. Straw discusses the screen construction of a
traumatized/masochistic male subjectivity by combining trauma cinema studies (Kaplan
and Wang 2004; Walker 2005; Elsaesser 1996) with Gilles Deleuze’s creative theoretical
reworking of the concept of masochism. In ‘When Places Have Agency: Roadside Shrines
as Traumascapes’ co-authors Catherine Collins and Alexandra Opie depart from cinematic
culture to consider one form of what Maria Tumarkin (2005) has denominated traumascapes. Invoking Foucault’s concept of heterochronia for the purposes of trauma
studies, Collins and Opie reflect on the urban cultural phenomenon of roadside shrines that
proliferate on back roads of the United States. The reflection on the embodied performance
of traumatic memory, as well as a concern with the ethics of spectatorship of the suffering
of others, is continued in Sophie Oliver’s essay, ‘Trauma, Bodies, and Performance Art:
Towards an Embodied Ethics of Seeing’, where she discusses ways in which performance
art embraces a model of embodied, self-reflective and ethical spectatorship. David Carlin’s
contribution, ‘Poetic Witnessing in the Archive: The Database Narrative of Life after
Wartime’, considers the ethics of witnessing by returning to the analysis of screen arts –
this time neither documentary video nor narrative cinema, but an Australian interactive
database narrative project, which, as Carlin proposes, can be seen as a new model of
trauma text, one which avoids either narrative or therapeutic closure.
The final group of essays returns to cinematic culture. Vivien Fryd’s ‘Bearing Witness to the Trauma of Slavery in Kara Walker’s videos: Testimony, Eight Possible Beginnings, and I was transported’ discusses three cinematic works by the controversial African-American artist Kara Walker. Fryd claims that through these works the artist forces her viewers to witness the transgenerational trauma of slavery and racism in the United States by embodying trauma’s disruptive potential. In ‘Depiction or Erasure? Violence and Trauma in Contemporary Peruvian Film’, Iliana Pagan-Teitelbaum discusses three narrative films made in this impoverished South American country. These films depict the traumatized bodies of Indigenous people, thus exploring ‘the trauma of misery, racism, forced migration, and dirty war’. The final essay, ‘Dictatorship Memories: Working through Trauma in Chilean Post-dictatorship Documentary’ by Antonio Traverso, considers Chilean documentary cinema made in the period after the military dictatorship. Traverso claims that these documentaries, whose recurrent theme is the memory of that traumatic past, work through Chile’s historical trauma by revealing ‘productive attributes of life under dictatorship, such as the people’s agency, resilience and capacity to imagine the future’.

In summary, this collection contributes to the broader project of a critical trauma studies by emphasizing – and also constituting – a set of aims and principles which include thematic and cross-cultural epistemologies that deepen the discussion about the relationship between individual memory/trauma and collective or cultural memory-/trauma. It engages with the potential of established methodologies in fields such as screen studies while embracing multi- and inter-disciplinarity, in recognition that there is not one but numerous theories and concepts of trauma. These collected writings cultivate methodological openings to alternative ways of approaching trauma representation, besides the conventional psychoanalytic theory of subjective dissociation. Examples of such openings, illustrated by the writings assembled here, include: Laplanchian psychoanalysis; contemporary performance theory; philosophical theorizations (for instance, concepts of the sublime, Benjamin’s reflection on shock, Foucault’s notion of heterochronia, Deleuze’s theory of masochism, and Agamben’s theory of biopolitics); Klein’s critique of disaster capitalism; critical human geography; and the sociology and anthropology of social suffering, violence, conflict and resilience. As such, this collection is testament to the diversity and richness of the field, and to the ongoing desire for the continued analysis and application of theory to the representation of trauma and social suffering around the globe.

Notes

1. By ‘the West’ and ‘the Third World’ we mean not only the geographical enclaves of hegemonic, wealthy Western nations, such as Australia, Canada, Europe and the United States, in opposition to the poor nations of Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, and Oceania, but also the differing socio-cultural spaces that exist within national geographical boundaries, such as post-colonial Indigenous groups and disenfranchised racial and diasporic groups living in Western countries.
2. The concept of trauma based on a model of subjective dissociation – by virtue of which the traumatized subject’s sense of self is violently estranged from its relation with present experience by the constant, unannounced irruption into conscious experience of the traces of a painful past – has been developed, firstly, in psychoanalysis and other psychological approaches in relation to the war phenomenon of shell shock and, more recently, as the basis of the clinical definition of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
3. See Radstone and Hodgkin (2005), Radstone (2000), and the journals History & Memory, Memory Studies and Screen the Past (www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/).
5. The conventional theory of cultural trauma as a ‘crisis of representation’ is conveyed by Cathy Caruth, one of its best-known exponents (see Caruth 1995, 1996); for a lucid explanation of Caruth’s theory, see chapter 8 in Leys (2000).


8. Also see Pusca (forthcoming 2010); and for two recent cases of engagement with Benjamin’s theories in the context of cultural trauma studies, see Kaplan (2005) and Collins and Davis (2004).

9. On the origin of trauma studies: ‘Trauma studies originated in the context of research about the Holocaust’ (Kaplan 2005, 1); on the origin of genocide studies: ‘early [genocide] literature drew upon more than a decade of intensive research on the Jewish Holocaust’ (Jones 2006, 14).

10. A recent double special issue of the journal *Life Writing* is devoted entirely to *trauma* as the theme of a ‘vigorous and widespread turn to the practice and theory of life writing (a term that covers biography, autobiography and variants and mutations of both)’; see Douglas, Whitlock, and Stumm (2008, 1).


17. The contributions by Perera and Walker to this collection, which respectively discuss the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 and Hurricane Katrina in the United States in 2005, make it clear that the separation between ‘natural’ and ‘human-induced’ disasters is a problematic one because the inner structure of human suffering is invariably political. See also Giblett (2009) and Pearson (2008).

18. This emphasis on working through trauma texts and strategies is noticeable in the work of many established trauma scholars, among whom one of the most influential is Dominick LaCapra (1997, 2001).

19. See Kaplan (2005) and Walker (2005), among many others.


21. See Sharpe et al. (2007); this is an edited collection of essays originally presented at the Australian Society for Continental Philosophy conference, Deakin University, 2006; also see Collins and Davis (2004), where the authors use ‘Benjamin’s theories of history, modernity and shock’ (8) in their discussion of what they call ‘post-Mabo cinema’, that is, recent Australian films that engage with the history of race relations in this country.


23. Best illustrated by the work of Jeffrey Alexander, Neil Smelser and others at the Centre for Advanced Studies in the Behavioural Sciences at Yale University; see Alexander et al. (2004) and Eyerman (2001).


25. Alexander et al. seem to discard important aspects – for example, that the analogy between psychological trauma and cultural trauma is not a fortuitous one. On the contrary, it is because there are actual traumatized individuals – generally survivors and direct witnesses – within those communities where a trauma culture purportedly develops, that this culture represents and often resembles the traumatic symptoms of sufferers. Additionally, the argument of a complete separation between the cultural elaborations produced in response to a catastrophic event and the event itself contains crucial political implications, as it may provide theoretical tools to genocide and atrocity deniers.

26. As indicated by Radstone in her biographical note, ‘she is currently completing a project on new approaches to trauma, to be published as *Getting over Trauma*’; Bennett toys with the idea of trauma culture’s passing out of fashion within the art world (2005, 149); and Huysssen suggests that the privileged attention hitherto given to trauma has resulted in ‘a thick discursive network’ that stresses ‘repression, spectres, and a present repetitively haunted by the past’ (2003, 8).
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References


