

TRAUMA

Trauma has become a catchword of our time and a central category in contemporary theory and criticism. In this illuminating and accessible volume, Lucy Bond and Stef Craps:

- provide an account of the history of the concept of trauma from the late nineteenth century to the present day
- examine debates around the term in their historical and cultural contexts
- trace the origins and growth of literary trauma theory
- introduce the reader to key thinkers in the field
- explore important issues and tensions in the study of trauma as a cultural phenomenon
- outline and assess recent critiques and revisions of cultural trauma research

Trauma is an essential guide to a rich and vibrant area of literary and cultural inquiry.

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TRAUMA

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First published 2020
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record has been requested for this book

ISBN: 978-0-415-54041-4 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-415-54042-1 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-203-38306-3 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Taylor & Francis Books

For Alex, Karen, and Amber



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book has been a long time in the making, and we have incurred debts of gratitude to many people and institutions along the way. We want to thank our colleagues in the School of Humanities at the University of Westminster and the Department of Literary Studies and the Cultural Memory Studies Initiative at Ghent University for their valuable input. We are grateful also to Michael Rothberg and Jessica Rapson for their support from the outset of this project. Moreover, we wish to thank Ghent University and the Flemish Research Council (FWO) for the sabbatical leave that allowed Stef to write part of the book, and Roger Luckhurst and Katia Pizzi for hosting him as a visiting scholar at Birkbeck and the School of Advanced Study, University of London during that time. We want to particularly acknowledge our students, on various courses we have taught at Westminster, Ghent, and UCLA over the years, for helping us think through many of the issues explored here. Polly Dodson and Zoe Meyer have been extremely patient and encouraging editors, as has the series editor, John Drakakis. Many thanks to all three of them. Most of all, though, we owe a debt of gratitude to our partners, Alex Hensby and Karen Van Holm, for cheering us on during the writing of this book, and to Stef's daughter Amber, for providing welcome distractions. The book is dedicated to them. Our hope for it is that, in some small way, it will help readers navigate and make sense of the troubled world in which we live, which is haunted not only by the spectres of past atrocities but also by the ghosts of devastations that are ongoing or yet to come.

SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

The New Critical Idiom is a series of introductory books which seeks to extend the lexicon of literary terms, in order to address the radical changes which have taken place in the study of literature during the last decades of the twentieth century. The aim is to provide clear, well-illustrated accounts of the full range of terminology currently in use, and to evolve histories of its changing usage.

The current state of the discipline of literary studies is one where there is considerable debate concerning basic questions of terminology. This involves, among other things, the boundaries which distinguish the literary from the non-literary; the position of literature within the larger sphere of culture; the relationship between literatures of different cultures; and questions concerning the relation of literary to other cultural forms within the context of interdisciplinary studies.

It is clear that the field of literary criticism and theory is a dynamic and heterogeneous one. The present need is for individual volumes on terms which combine clarity of exposition with an adventurousness of perspective and a breadth of application. Each volume will contain as part of its apparatus some indication of the direction in which the definition of particular terms is likely to move, as well as expanding the disciplinary boundaries within which some of these terms have been traditionally contained. This will involve some re-situation of terms within the larger field of cultural representation, and will introduce examples from the area of film and the modern media in addition to examples from a variety of literary texts.



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INTRODUCTION: NOT EVEN PAST

On 18 March 2008, Democratic Illinois Senator Barack Obama gave a speech at the Constitution Center in Philadelphia. The address was intended to cool the controversy that had erupted in the wake of an *ABC News* investigation into the sermons of Reverend Jeremiah Wright, who had repeatedly denounced the United States for its long-standing racial violence against people of colour. In one excerpt from 2003, Wright raged, ‘God damn America for treating our citizens as less than human. God damn America for as long as she acts like she is God and she is supreme’ (qtd in Ross and El-Buri 2008). Even more contentiously, Wright argued that America’s own ‘terrorism’ in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, more than fifty years earlier, had led to the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. Obama acknowledged that Wright, who was his former pastor and an unpaid campaign adviser, had made a ‘profound mistake’ in his divisive claims. However, he cautioned, ‘race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore’; ‘Understanding this reality requires a reminder of how we arrived at this point. As William Faulkner once wrote, “The past isn’t dead and buried. In fact, it isn’t even past”’ (2008).

While Obama slightly misquoted Faulkner—the correct lines, taken from the 1951 novel *Requiem for a Nun*, read, ‘The past is

never dead. It's not even past⁷—we share this sentiment. The past is alive in the present, and its legacies continue to resonate in complex and controversial ways. While the traces of the past are all around us, the memories that exert the deepest pull on our emotions are often those connected to violent histories. Traumatic experiences leave deep scars that can remain unresolved for decades, generations, even centuries. Being bound to the past while struggling to overcome it is no short order: as Obama argues, the challenge is to find a means of 'embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past' (2008). His Philadelphia speech charts America's evolution from European colony to global superpower, citing the War of Independence, the Civil War, slavery, lynching, Jim Crow, the Great Depression, the Second World War, the AIDS epidemic, the O. J. Simpson trial, 9/11, the 'War on Terror', Hurricane Katrina, the healthcare crisis, and climate change as definitive moments in the nation's journey. In so doing, it casts American history as a melting pot of traumas, some past, some present, and some still unfolding, but all of them active and enduring.

As Obama suggests, violent histories are nothing new. However, the development of a diagnostic language able to identify them as 'traumatic' is surprisingly recent. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2000), the first recorded mention of 'trauma' (which comes from the Greek word for wound) in English occurred in 1693, when the second edition of *Blanchard's Physical Dictionary* defined it as 'a wound from an external cause'. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, trauma was understood as a physical injury. It was not until the late nineteenth century, when the enormous transformations of industrial modernity exposed people to new and hitherto unimagined dangers, that the notion of *psychological* trauma began to take root. As Google's Ngram viewer (an online search engine that tracks the frequency with which a term has been found in print between 1500 and 2008) reveals, the rise of trauma has been meteoric. References to trauma increased 3,600% between 1880 and the end of the First World War in 1918, and a massive 31,000% between 1880 and the highest number of annual mentions in 2004. As we will argue throughout this book, the reasons for this trauma boom are complicated: it is not that our lives have become inherently more

traumatic, but that we have found new ways to categorize, represent, and exploit distressing experiences.

Today, trauma is big business. It is the focus of numerous novels, artworks, films, songs, and video games. A trauma aesthetic has come to dominate the architecture of monuments and museums, from Maya Lin's iconic Vietnam Veterans' Memorial on the Mall in Washington, DC to Peter Eisenman's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in central Berlin. A thriving trauma industry informs our leisure and consumer choices: dark tourist locations such as concentration camps, battlefields, plantations, and prisons draw millions of visitors each year, and their gift shops boast huge turnovers. Fashion retailers have also sought to capitalize on trauma's commercial potential: in 2014, the British clothing chain Zara released a line of striped children's pyjamas reminiscent of the outfits worn by prisoners in Auschwitz, complete with a gold star on the breast pocket. Meanwhile, online sales of official and unofficial Black Lives Matter merchandise have helped transform a grass-roots movement that campaigns against violence and systemic racism towards black Americans into a globally recognizable brand. Yet, the motivations that underlie the marketing and consumption of trauma differ widely. While wearing a Black Lives Matter T-shirt might legitimately be seen as a positive form of political engagement, it is more difficult to understand what might reasonably encourage a parent to purchase a pair of 'Holocaust pyjamas' for their child. Such differences illustrate the importance of exploring the differential ethical and ideological dynamics at work in the trauma industry.

This is equally the case in mainstream political culture, where groups at both ends of the spectrum have used the rhetoric of trauma to frame their demands for recognition and rights. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the language of trauma provided a vehicle for feminist and gay rights activists to articulate their experiences of marginalization and abuse. While the predominantly liberal discourses associated with such identity politics have historically found little sympathy from conservative campaigners, more recently the narrative of victimhood has taken a surprising ideological turn, as alt-right groups in Europe and America have sought to emphasize their own sense of disenfranchisement. The success of today's

political movements, left and right, is often premised upon activists' ability to exploit a competitive politics of grief that sees claims for recognition played out in raced, gendered, classed, or sexualized terms. As Terri Tomskey has noted, such zero-sum debates constitute a 'trauma economy' in which memories are mediated by 'economic, cultural, discursive, and political structures that guide, enable and ultimately institutionalize the representation, travel and attention to certain traumas' (2011: 53). So central has the idea of trauma become to questions about identity, inclusion, and belonging that critics have argued that we are living in a trauma culture, defined by a valorization of victimhood (Farrell 1998; Luckhurst 2003; Luckhurst 2008; Kaplan 2005).

Yet, for all its ubiquity, the definition of trauma remains unstable. The transition from professional to popular discourse has arguably led to a loss of specificity in its meaning and application. As we will see, such changeability has characterized the term throughout its history. So how should we conceptualize this most mutable pathology? Richard Crownshaw notes that, despite ongoing debate, critics generally agree that 'trauma is that which defies witnessing, cognition, conscious recall and representation' (2010: 4). Drawing upon the Freudian model of trauma and the more recent categorization of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), both explored in Chapter 1, most cultural and literary theories position trauma as a *belated* response to an overwhelming event too shattering to be processed as it occurs. Traumatic memories are repressed as they are formed, leaving them unavailable to conscious recall; subsequently, they recur in various displaced ways, as hallucinations, flashbacks, or nightmares. When the traumatic experience returns, unbidden, to consciousness, the sudden collision of past and present 'violently opens passageways between systems that were once discrete, making unforeseen connections that distress or confound' (Luckhurst 2008: 3). Trauma is both highly resistant to articulation and wildly generative of narratives that seek to explicate the 'unclaimed' originary experience (Caruth 1996). As Roger Luckhurst suggests, trauma 'also appears worryingly transmissible: it leaks between mental and physical symptoms, between patients ... between patients and doctors via the mysterious processes of transference or suggestion, and between victims and their listeners or viewers' (2008: 3).

Trauma, then, is slippery: blurring the boundaries between mind and body, memory and forgetting, speech and silence. It traverses the internal and the external, the private and the public, the individual and the collective. Trauma is dynamic: its parameters are endlessly shifting as it moves across disciplines and institutions, ages and cultures. Trauma is contested: its rhetoric, its origins, its symptoms, and its treatment have been subject to more than 150 years of controversy and debate. As Ruth Leys contends, '[t]he history of trauma itself is marked by an alternation between episodes of remembering and forgetting, as the experiences of one generation of psychiatrists have been neglected only to be revived at a later time' (2000: 15). Judith Herman consequently suggests that the intellectual history of trauma is *traumatized*, marked by 'episodic amnesia', 'periodically forgotten', and 'periodically reclaimed' (1992b: 7). For all of the above reasons, Mark Micale and Paul Lerner assert that trauma 'is nothing if not elastic' (2001: 20).

With a full awareness of these complexities, this book examines various conceptions of trauma in the light of their historical, institutional, and cultural contexts as we explore how trauma has moved from an object of medical and legal concern in nineteenth-century Europe to a central facet of global culture today. This is not a clinical history: we do not aim to offer a detailed account of changing psychiatric approaches to trauma. Nor have we written an exhaustive genealogy of the historical events and cultural media most associated with traumatic memories. Rather, we will highlight some of the most important developments in trauma studies, focusing in particular on the evolution of literary trauma theory. There are significant overlaps between the fields of literature and trauma. As Anne Whitehead establishes, '[t]he rise of trauma theory has provided novelists with new ways of conceptualising trauma and has shifted attention away from the question of what is remembered of the past to how and why it is remembered' (2004: 3). The widespread desire 'among various cultural groups to represent or make visible specific historical instances of trauma has given rise to numerous important works of contemporary fiction' (2004: 3). Whitehead points, in particular, to the work of the late Toni Morrison and her ongoing attempts to reckon with the trauma of slavery in novels such as *Beloved* (1987) and *Jazz* (1992). As Whitehead

observes, 'fiction itself has been marked or changed by its encounter with trauma. Novelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterised by repetition and indirection' (2004: 3). The result of this encounter, she suggests, is the new genre of 'trauma fiction', represented by authors such as W. G. Sebald, Caryl Phillips, and Anne Michaels. While a growing number of literary critics have become interested in the study of trauma fiction, meanwhile, contemporary authors have in turn been influenced by psychiatric and psychoanalytical paradigms of trauma. Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy (1991–1995; see Barker 2013), for example, examines the treatment of shell-shocked soldiers, including the poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, at Craiglockhart Hospital in Edinburgh during the First World War.

While, as we will see, the boundaries of trauma fiction have been questioned and a wider range of texts is currently being studied than was the case during the early days of literary trauma theory, trauma is rarely projected far back in time. Literature has represented human suffering, whether real or imagined, for as long as it has existed, but trauma relates specifically to a psychical condition connected to, and recognized after, the onset of Western modernity. Moreover, the thematization and formal emulation of the 'unspeakability' of trauma appears to be a modern innovation. As a general rule, pre-modern narrative forms such as ancient Greek tragedy do not focus on the impossibility of articulating experiences that are unavailable to conscious memory the way works of trauma literature do. The latter also tend to eschew the kind of cathartic redemption often embraced by tragedy and its theorists, most famously the Greek philosopher Aristotle, who argued in his *Poetics* that a good tragedy should incite 'pity and fear' in its audience. By contrast, modern trauma writers and critics typically discourage adopting a vicarious relationship to the suffering of others, regarding it as appropriative and unethical. Rather than aiming for comprehensive coverage of conceptions and expressions of human suffering throughout history, therefore, this book focuses its critical energies on examining manifestations, theorizations, and representations of trauma from the nineteenth century to the present.

Chapter 1 traces the relationship between trauma and modernity, arguing that the intellectual history of trauma cannot be viewed in isolation from the social, economic, political, and cultural contexts in which it is embedded and with which it interacts. We begin by exploring how studies of railway and industrial accidents in Britain and Germany in the mid-to-late nineteenth century took the first step in repositioning trauma from a physical wound to a psychological injury. Next, we examine how early clinical research on nervous disorders gradually shifted from an interest in physiological models of hysteria towards a more psychodynamic approach to trauma, focusing on the seminal work of Jean-Martin Charcot, Pierre Janet, and Sigmund Freud. Third, we consider how the massive psychological impact of the First World War was responded to in different national contexts, highlighting the ways in which military and political interests affected the codification and reception of mental illness. As we will see, the link between trauma and warfare was reinforced throughout the twentieth century, most explicitly in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, when the American Psychiatric Association (APA) officially recognized PTSD for the first time in the third edition of its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association 1980). The APA's classification of PTSD gave medical legitimacy to trauma patients, raising the public profile of the pathology. Finally, the chapter addresses the migration of the concept of trauma from psychiatric discourse into contemporary 'wound culture' (Seltzer 1997), a society obsessed with displaying its traumas.

Chapter 2 examines how trauma functions in literary and cultural theory. We trace the interest paid by literary and cultural scholars to issues of trauma over the last three decades back to the work of Theodor Adorno, particularly to his famous claim that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' (1981: 34) and his later statement that 'literature must resist this verdict' (1980: 188). We illustrate how the imperative to represent the unrepresentable, which Adorno set art and cultural criticism, also informs the work of George Steiner, Maurice Blanchot, and Jean-François Lyotard. We go on to explain why in the 1990s a number of literary theorists who share a background in deconstruction—Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Geoffrey Hartman—turned their attention to this paradoxical task,

becoming leading figures in cultural trauma theory. Offering a brief survey of paradigm shifts in literary studies over the last quarter of the twentieth century, we describe how deconstruction went from being the dominant paradigm in the 1970s and early 1980s to being increasingly maligned and marginalized in the course of the 1980s. Accused of being indifferent and irrelevant to history, politics, and ethics because of its alleged excessive fixation on language, deconstruction was eclipsed by various new paradigms that purported to be more attentive to such 'real-world' issues, including new historicism, cultural materialism, cultural studies, postcolonialism, feminism, and Marxism. We argue that trauma theory as developed by Caruth, Felman, Hartman, and their colleague Dori Laub in the early 1990s can be understood as an attempt to reclaim an ethical space for deconstruction by stressing its usefulness as a critical tool for interrogating the relationship between referentiality and historical violence.

Chapter 3 shows the range and heterogeneity of cultural trauma theory by exploring some important issues and tensions that have marked the field over the past several decades. We discuss how the work of founding figures like Caruth, Felman, Hartman, and Laub has been revised and expanded by later theorists, looking particularly at the possibility of collective or cultural trauma and the debates surrounding secondary or vicarious witnessing. We begin by considering the difference between structural and historical trauma, which is often overlooked in early trauma theory. As Dominick LaCapra argues, structural trauma results from a foundational absence and thus cannot be overcome. By contrast, historical trauma relates to a specific instance of loss and carries the possibility of being worked through in time, allowing a productive re-engagement with the future. We then move on to examine the critical tensions that have emerged over the transmission of trauma, looking at the possibility that traumatic memories may be passed across generations and may even be assumed by people with no direct connection to the original experience. We assess the changing media through which secondary traumatization has been said to occur, including the extent to which evolving media and digital technologies have shaped the transmission of trauma since the turn of the new millennium. Finally, we turn to the idea of collective trauma, which has proved particularly contentious in recent scholarship. We highlight the differences between

theorists who understand trauma to occur in collectives in much the same ways as it does in individuals and those who understand collective or cultural trauma as a social construct.

Chapter 4 acquaints the reader with four of the latest developments in cultural trauma research by outlining and assessing various critiques and revisions intended to expand, reorient, or otherwise advance the field. First, we highlight the blind-spots that have led canonical trauma theory to marginalize the experiences of non-Western and minority groups by prioritizing ‘Western’ atrocities such as the Holocaust and 9/11. In an attempt to redress this imbalance, a number of scholars have argued that the parameters of cultural trauma studies must be widened to address other traumatic experiences such as those associated with slavery, colonialism, apartheid, Partition, and the Stolen Generations. A related strand of criticism, spearheaded by Michael Rothberg’s influential work on ‘multidirectional memory’ (2009), has called for a comparative approach to memory that views historical violence through a cross-cultural framework. The second new direction of cultural trauma research that we focus upon is a tendency to study texts—popular, realist, or indigenous literature—that deviate from the modernist aesthetic of fragmentation and discontinuity, adherence to which has long been seen as a requirement for entry into the canon of valued trauma literature. Moreover, more and more attention is being paid to the representation of traumatic experiences in media other than literature, particularly photography, film, theatre, and video games. We suggest that this extension of trauma theory in the direction of visual culture is unsurprising given the central role accorded to intrusive images in dominant models of trauma. The third development we explore is a critical shift from prioritizing the experience of the victim to exploring that of the perpetrator: while testimonial and literary work by and about victims has received a great deal of critical and scholarly attention, the dearth of research on representations of perpetrators has only just begun to be addressed. Finally, we look at recent debates surrounding the psychological impact of climate change and other forms of ‘pre-traumatic experience’ that challenge established models of temporality and causality.

The conclusion offers some final remarks on the benefits as well as the limits of cultural trauma research. Trauma studies can provide a basis for cultural and political critique by fostering attunement to previously unheard suffering, we argue, but an obsession with traumatic histories threatens to displace other kinds of memory, including memories of non-traumatizing injustice and of collective mobilization, with potentially depoliticizing results. While the field of trauma studies continues to evolve, tapping into new and fertile areas of research, it would be prudent to guard against overreach and overambition.

Examining key developments in the theorization of trauma over the past 150 years, with an emphasis on its role in literary and cultural scholarship, this book aims to provide insight into the ways in which the past is ‘not even past’. Writing in the *Guardian* in the run-up to the third official Holocaust Memorial Day in 2003, the British historian David Cesarani contended that there was ‘no truer’ reflection of Faulkner’s words than the legacies of ‘Nazi persecution and mass murder of the Jews between 1933 and 1945, and the “racial state” that Hitler created in Germany and nearly imposed on the whole of Europe’. ‘After more than half a century’, Cesarani asserted, ‘racism, xenophobia and political intolerance remain potent forces throughout Europe’ (2002). The same, of course, is true today, as the resurgence of the far right and the rise of neo-Nazism across Europe and America make clear. However, Cesarani saw in Holocaust Memorial Day more than ‘a simple act of piety: it is designed to be a springboard for positive action’. In recognizing how the events of the Second World War continue to haunt the present, ‘communities have discovered former refugees in their midst and unearthed histories of local activism on behalf of those seeking a haven from oppression’. In turn, ‘these memories have provoked questions about the way British society and the state behaved in the 1930s, and inevitably, how we act today towards refugees and asylum seekers’ (2002).

Cesarani argued that by encouraging wider cultural recognition of the intimate relationship between the past and the present, events like Holocaust Memorial Day have the potential to challenge ongoing forms of violence and injustice. In his Philadelphia address, Obama similarly urged that confronting the ‘racial stalemate we’ve been stuck in for years’ could lead the United States to

‘a more perfect union’ (2008). The presentness of the past, then, need not be a uniquely bad thing: reflexively addressed, it holds the potential to generate transhistorical and transcultural forms of empathy and understanding. However, this would require a collective willingness to adopt a critical perspective on history, and to acknowledge different forms of traumatic experience without appropriating them. As Obama cautioned in his famous speech on race, we must ‘find the common stake we all have in one another, and let our politics reflect that spirit as well’ (2008). This must surely be the goal of any truly ethical culture of trauma.

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