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Teaching Trauma: (Neo-)Slave Narratives and Cultural (Re-)Memory

Deborah L. Madsen

This essay is not based upon the teaching of a particular course but rather on my experience of teaching African American literature in a wide variety of pedagogical contexts: to middle-class white British students at a research university in the English Midlands, to working-class Afro-Caribbean students at a 'new' university in London, to non-Anglophone students of diverse ethnic and class backgrounds, including immigrant and refugee experiences, at the University of Geneva. I say "*teaching* African American Literature *to*" but that is an unfortunate phrasing. While, on the one hand, I want to open to students the important archive of African American writing of which they are often unaware, on the other hand I seek to create in the classroom a constructive environment in which to stage a conversation about the range of moral, ethical, and political as well as aesthetic issues raised by this body of writing. Students are often unaware of the black American literary tradition; almost invariably they are unaware of the context of trauma theory within which these texts can be discussed. Certainly, when I began teaching African American literature "trauma theory" as such had yet to come into existence as a category of critical thought. And yet, issues of trauma–of memory and memorialization, of history and historical reconstruction, of literature and social justice, of language and identity, and so on–are also central concepts of the black American literary canon. To complicate these debates through the deployment of the theoretical context of trauma studies is what I have sought to do in my teaching.

This essay looks at some of the problematics of teaching the slave narrative tradition: from the foundational nineteenth-century autobiographical narratives by Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs to twentieth-century neo-slave narratives like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred*. An important issue arising from this historical juxtaposition of the autobiographical with the fictional is the question of "normalizing" traumatic experience. By normalization I mean the scripting of trauma and its assimilation to cultural narratives of normality. The untranslatability of trauma makes survivor discourse especially reliant upon cultural scripting for the conditions of its own meaning, even when it may resist these cultural ideologies. The ineffable nature of trauma creates a relationship of dependency with discourse to bring it into a "condition of significance" (Shoshana Felman's term). The recreation of the slave narrative cannot but be enmeshed in a number of contemporary North American cultural scripts which seek to control the significance of this historical trauma: in particular contemporary feminist analyses of patriarchal power structures. Novels by writers such as Morrison and Butler can be seen to derive validation from these cultural scripts and, in turn, to confirm these discourses as powerful cultural narratives. This should not be so surprising: historical trauma can be destructive of some cultural narratives but can also function to affirm others (for example, the genocide of Native Americans can confirm narratives of the Vanishing American and of Manifest Destiny). A central tenet of my teaching practice is that

students must be made aware (and self-aware) of their roles in this potential rescripting and normalization of historical trauma.

Specific issues that arise, and are discussed in the essay that follows, include: the representation of historical change and the theorizing of the relation between individual and cultural experience (which is key in terms of articulating the notion of "cultural mourning"); and the ethics of appropriating historical experience by contemporary writers of fiction (in contrast to the autobiographical representations of their personal experiences which provided the basis for the foundational texts of the slave narrative genre). The teaching of the slave narrative tradition is discussed in conjunction with the theorizing of trauma, to argue that the promotion of self-awareness about the process of constructing traumatic cultural memory in the teaching of African American Women's writing is both problematic and essential if we, as teachers, are to raise the awareness of students about the cultural, historical, political, and gendered issues that these texts invoke.

TRAUMATIC MEMORY AND "THE WITNESS"

The study of slave narratives, which present an autobiographical account of slavery within a tradition leading us to contemporary neo-slave narratives that fictionalize the history of American slavery, inevitably raises the question of memory and temporality. In most accounts of trauma, deriving largely but not exclusively from Freud's foundational work, there are two moments in the chronology of trauma: the original event and its belated emergence as a symptom. Ruth Leys explains: "The experience of the trauma, fixed or frozen in time, refuses to be represented *as* past, but is perpetually re-experienced in a painful, dissociated, traumatic present" (2000, p. 2). Trauma is defined by this belated temporality; trauma resides in the repetition of an earlier event that is forgotten or repressed and so is neither recalled nor known as traumatic. In the essay, "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History," Cathy Caruth argues that trauma describes "an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic, events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (1991, p. 181). But these repetitions are not identical and because each repetition is not self-identical there opens the potential for analysis. To assist students in their understanding of this concept, we read together in class Freud's 1914 essay, "Remembering, Repeating, Working-Through," where he establishes a distinction between two kinds of repetition of the traumatic moment. "Acting out" is the neurotic repetition of trauma; in contrast, "working-through" is a therapeutic repetition that enables the patient to move towards healing: "... the patient repeats instead of remembering, and repeats under the conditions of resistance. ... he repeats everything that has already made its way from the sources of the repressed into his manifest personality–his inhibitions and unserviceable attitudes and his pathological character-traits. He also repeats all his symptoms in the course of the treatment" (1914, p. 151). But by the constructive remembering and working-through of the symptoms, the way "is thus paved from the beginning for a reconciliation with the repressed material which is coming to expression in his symptoms, while at the same time place is found for a certain tolerance for the state of being ill" (1914, p. 152). These two kinds of repetition are central to Dominick LaCapra's influential work on the Holocaust and related forms of historical trauma. In order that students can understand the Freudian context of LaCapra's work, and that of other contemporary theorists who draw upon psychoanalytic concepts, I introduce early in the teaching unit both Freud's 1914 essay and also his 1917 essay, "Mourning and Melancholia." The later essay presents a slightly different perspective upon the two stages of trauma by contrasting the normal and healthy process of mourning, after the loss of a loved person or ideal or abstraction, against the pathological process of melancholia where loss becomes a

motive to self-destruction. Freud writes: "melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious" (p. 245). Melancholia is therefore characterized by repression where mourning is not.

The reading of these two essays by Freud is prerequisite to an understanding of LaCapra's seminal 1999 essay, "Trauma, Absence, Loss," where he takes up the idea of historical trauma and the possibility of reconciliation. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission provides a dramatic example of the necessity for such a possibility but also its difficulty. The work of the TRC is described by LaCapra as an attempt to instigate a therapeutic process of "working-through": "to engage this collective ritual process of mourning losses in order to create conditions for a more desirable future" (p. 697). Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia LaCapra interprets in terms of a distinction between absence and loss that he discusses in its ethical and political dimensions:

> Indeed, the problem for beneficiaries of earlier oppression ... is how to recognize and mourn the losses of former victims and simultaneously to find a legitimate way to represent and mourn for their own losses without having a self-directed process occlude victims' losses or enter into an objectionable balancing of accounts (for example, in such statements as "Don't talk to us about the Holocaust unless you are going to talk about the pillage, rape, and dislocation on the eastern front caused by the Russian invasion toward the end of the war" or "Don't talk to us about the horrors of apartheid if you say nothing about the killing of civilians and police by antiapartheid agitators and activists") (p. 697).

The question of how to mourn through memorialization the legacies of American slavery raise the same ethical and political issues. The "unspeakability" of trauma as loss on a scale beyond the capacity of ordinary language to express complicates this necessary question of how to mourn without the pathology of melancholia. For LaCapra, the answer lies in the distinction between absence and loss: "When loss is converted into (or encrypted in an indiscriminately generalized rhetoric of) absence, one faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted" (p. 698). And the difference between absence and loss he engages through the location of the present in relation to the traumatic past: so long as we can envision future possibilities and remember that we are situated in a *post*-traumatic moment, then the abyss of "impossible mourning" or melancholia can be avoided. The role of the witness in this process is of key importance. Whether that witness is an actor in the traumatic events of the past or what LaCapra calls a "secondary witness" who reconstructs that past, if the witness succumbs to "vicarious victimhood" by empathizing virtually with the trauma victim to the point that empathy becomes an identity then compulsive repetition (acting-out) takes the place of constructive "working-through." A fragile balance between the needs of the present and the imperatives of the traumatic past must be sustained through the perspective of the witness.

It is in this context that I present to students such stylistic elements of slave narratives as the distinction in autobiography between the remembering voice and the subject of lived trauma, or the use of time travel in Octavia Butler's neo-slave narrative, *Kindred*, or Toni Morrison's use of the haunting ghost motif in *Beloved*. For example, one of the most enigmatic elements of *Kindred* is the symbolic significance of Dana's loss of her arm as she returns from her final visit to the antebellum past. LaCapra writes: "The conversion of absence into loss gives anxiety an identifiable object–the lost object–and generates the hope that anxiety may be eliminated or overcome" (1999, p. 707). Butler's inscription of the

physical loss of a bodily part, a limb, can be read as the displacement of historical and emotional loss (as experienced by Dana's enslaved ancestors) into a material absence with which Dana can learn to cope, as she learns to accept her new knowledge of the suffering that lies at the origins of her family history.

The fundamental theoretical issue that LaCapra's work addresses is the methodological shift from the traumatized individual to the notion of a traumatized culture, society or history. The move from the individual to the collective does not proceed by a simple and transparent relation of synechdoche or metonymy, where the individual somehow represents and "stands for" the collective. The ways in which an individual subject can be traumatized are not the same as the mechanisms that produce what we might call traumatized collectivities. Or are they? This question cuts to the heart of the pedagogical enterprise of nurturing self-consciousness and self-awareness among students located in a specific historical time and place.

The relationship between public acts of mourning and memorialization: museums, monuments, images and spaces, for example, and individual mourning processes can be mediated by literary texts, such as the literary archive of slave narratives, which are seen to be included in this work of memorialization. But how the past is remembered differs according to such contextualizing discourses as politics, cultural ideals, and inherited myths. The purpose of such remembering and memorialization can be education or expiation or both. In my teaching, I find it absolutely necessary to problematize the notions of memory that students bring to the early classes. The understanding of memory as a kind of database where experience can be preserved intact for indefinite periods of time within the container of the individual cranium, from where it can be retrieved upon a whim in all its original authenticity, is a common idea expressed by unreflecting students. Some writers promote, or at least do not contradict, this understanding when they use the potentially cathartic power of literary language in the fictionalized process of healing, where the special characteristics of poetic language can act as a mechanism by which the full horror of the traumatic event can be recovered in a moment of identity formation that brings together absence and loss in a compulsive repetition of past trauma. I use the term “recovered” advisedly to evoke the “recovery movement” in contemporary popular American psychology, which is founded on the principle that through therapy (involving a combination of self-help, support groups, addiction therapy, and the like) memories of childhood trauma can be pieced together as part of the process of healing. The shift in terminology to describe the nature of traumatic memory is significant, as Marita Sturken observes in her essay, “The Remembering of Forgetting: Recovered Memory and the Question of Experience”: “the slippage from *repressed* to *recovered* implies that remembrance is an activity that will *help one recover*” (p. 104). In Freudian terms repression is an active process of keeping dangerous knowledge from consciousness, and the symptomatic "acting-out" of traumatic memory is with difficulty converted into therapeutic "working-through" those unconscious memories, but in recovery psychology the active process is the recovery of memory. In this connection, it can be helpful for students to read fake trauma narratives, such as Binjamin Wilkomirski's false Holocaust narrative, *Fragments*, or to read some of the voluminous literature on "false memory syndrome" in order to be reminded that memories are not necessarily authentic and, in any case, are discursively constructed.

In her 1987 essay, “The Site of Memory,” Morrison argues that in autobiographical texts, such as the slave narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a “veil” (her metaphor) is drawn over the physically traumatic aspects of American slavery in narratives that strive to be as factual as possible. She describes her writerly mission to “rip” this veil so as to reveal interior lives: “I’m looking to find and expose a truth about the interior life of people who didn’t write it (which doesn’t mean they didn’t have it)” (113). Later in the same

essay she describes her route into these interior lives as emotional memory, “what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared” (119). These texts strive to be as objective as possible, recounting the literal facts of the extreme brutality with which slaves were treated. These autobiographical texts seek to provide evidence in support of the survivors’ claim for the acknowledgement of the violation of their human rights. What the survivor narratives do *not* describe is the nature of the emotional and psychological damage these individuals have suffered, damage that could possibly undermine their credibility as witnesses.

In the assumption that the writer of fiction can recreate circumstances of extreme historical trauma, neo-slave narratives raise questions about traumatic memory and its relation to cultural memory through the role of the witness within the context of a fiction. Questions such as: how is the role of the witness incorporated into the fiction? Who is the witness–the reader, the author, or the fictional protagonist? And how does testimony, upon which the psychoanalytical analysis of trauma is based, enter a fictional text? Can the text itself occupy the status of testimony even if it is fictional? Morrison, in this 1987 essay, suggests an organic relationship between memoir and fiction; she describes the similarities between the two as "places where those two crafts embrace and where that embrace is symbiotic" (p. 103). In the course of the essay she redefines these terms as "fact" and "truth" as she points out that "facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot" and the truth of memory is what mediates between the archive of images that is the residue of the past and the emotional recreation of that past in textual form.

In his book *The Ethics of Memory* (2002), philosopher Avishai Margalit argues that memory is knowledge *about* the past, not knowledge *from* the past; that memory is about belief rather than truth and so the agent who takes responsibility for shaping our belief in what has been the case must be a special agent of historical belief. He describes how: “[c]onveying the sensibility of events from the past that should be landmarks in our collective moral consciousness calls for a special agent of collective memory. Such an agent needs to be invested with special moral authority akin to that of the religious witness or martyr”–this agent he calls “the moral witness” (p. 14). The moral witness is a particularly significant figure in the memorialization of trauma which is described by Jeffrey Olick and others as the disruption of “the legitimating narrative[s] that we as individuals produce for us as a collectivity” (p. 345): in other words, the ongoing nature of trauma lies in historical events that cannot be integrated into the constitutive narratives of communities of memory. The moral status of the witness precludes mere survivors of such traumatic events as, say, natural disasters, where no morally evil force is involved. Margalit argues that “[b]eing a moral witness involves witnessing actual suffering, not just intended suffering. A moral witness has knowledge-by-acquaintance of suffering” (p. 149). And he goes on to ask the question especially pertinent here: “[D]oes acquaintance mean experiencing the suffering first-hand–as a victim–or can one know it as a sympathetic bystander, observing the suffering without being a victim oneself?” (p. 149). While Margalit concedes that it is possible to be a moral witness without being a victim, a moral witness must at the very least be at personal risk, and at risk as a consequence of acting as a moral witness. For a moral witness must testify to the existence of evil in the hope that in the future there will exist a moral community that will listen to and credit their testimony. The creation of such a moral community of readers is part of the effort of (neo-)slave narratives.

THE ETHICS OF REWRITING REMEMORY: FROM ONE TO MANY

Dominick LaCapra, in the introduction to his book *Representing the Holocaust* (1994), characterizes the role of the historian in narrating the past as "not a full identity but at most a subject-position that should be complemented, supplemented, and even contested by other

subject-positions (such as critical reader and intellectual)" (p. 10). This very useful description allows students to step outside such prescriptive categories as perpetrator and victim, for example, to consider much more complex types of traumatic experience as when an enslaved person (victim) may be required to act as overseer of other enslaved persons (and so act as a perpetrator of their suffering). This understanding also enables us to think of contemporary writers, who were never the immediate victims of American slavery, as variously historians, witnesses, inheritors, and re-imaginers of this historical trauma. As LaCapra goes on to remind us:

> A subject-position is at best a partial, problematic identity, and it is intricately bound up with the other subject-positions any social individual occupies. Certain subject-positions may become especially prominent or even overwhelming, for example, those of victim or perpetrator. but a subject-position becomes a total identity only in cases of extreme "acting-out" wherein one is possessed by the past and tends to repeat it compulsively as if it were fully present. Here identity is imaginary and may be related to pathological disorders. The tendency for a given subject-position to overwhelm the self and become a total identity becomes pronounced in trauma, and a victim's recovery may itself depend on the attempt to reconstruct the self as more than a victim (1994, p. 12).

It is an interesting exercise for students to read Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* in this context. The character of Sethe can be interpreted as a traumatized victim who permits the subject-position of "victim" to overwhelm her and to substitute for a full identity. Paul D. advises her that the death of her child was not the loss of the best part of herself; rather, he says, "You are your own best thing." Indeed, it is only after Sethe begins to perceive her own agency in the tragedy that has befallen her that she is able to move from the pathological "acting-out" stage of traumatic memory to a therapeutic "working-through." As LaCapra reminds us, recovery depends upon moving beyond an identification with the limited role of victim. In the conclusion of the novel, Sethe relives the earlier traumatic situation when Schoolteacher and the other slave catchers arrive to take her and her children back into slavery. But the difference is that rather than turn her violent desperation upon her children, "her best thing," she attacks the figure in the wagon, who is revealed to be not the slave catcher but the abolitionist Mr Bodwin. This repetition becomes not another acting-out of trauma but a positive working-through of the historical moment that leads Sethe to reconciliation with her history, both personal and as a member of the African-American community.

This movement from thinking through the experience of the individual to that of a community or culture is both necessary for students and highly problematic. An important essay that addresses this problem, in part in the context of Morrison's neo-slave narrative, is Walter Benn Michaels' "'You Who Never Was There': Slavery and the New Historicism – Deconstruction and the Holocaust" (1999). Michaels addresses the vexed issue of how those who belong to the generations subsequent to an historical trauma such as the Holocaust or American slavery can and should respond to that traumatic history. He poses the question: "Do memories come from my own life or from other lives lived long ago?" (p. 183) and begins to approach an answer by foregrounding the importance of collectivities such as nationhood: "as individuals have a national as well as an individual identity, they must have access not only to their own memories but to the national memory; they must be able to remember not only the things that happened to them as individuals but the things that happened to them as Americans" (p. 183). The complexities of remembering and forgetting Michaels explores in relation to Morrison's novel *Beloved*, observing that while the characters in the narrative want to forget something that did happen to them, readers are enjoined to

remember something that did not happen to them. Historical trauma such as slavery need not be experienced by the individual in order to be part of the collective memory or national history. It is through historical memory as constitutive of national identity that the individual can participate, as writer or reader, in the memorialization of events that are outside the limits of individual experience. Consequently, Michaels terms *Beloved* both an historical and also a historicist novel: "It is historical in that it's about the historical past; it is historicist in that–setting out to remember 'the disremembered'–it redescribes something we have never known as something we have forgotten and thus makes the historical past a part of our own experience" (p. 187).

The ghostly presence of the eponymous character Beloved achieves for Morrison what the technique of time travel makes possible for Octavia Butler: a means of bringing the past into the present. As Walter Benn Michaels writes, "the ghosts are not merely the figures for history as memory, they are the technology fro history as memory; to have the history, we have to have the ghosts" (p. 189). Recalling Dominick LaCapra's admonition that in order to give precedence to absence over loss in the context of historical trauma the past must be balanced against the demands of the present, these narrative techniques of time travel–taking the protagonist into the slave past–and haunting–bringing the past into the present–represent significant literary efforts to achieve a therapeutic witnessing of the traumatic history of slavery. At the same time that these texts seek to construct a therapeutic relationship with the traumatic past, they also seek to avoid idealization and with that the dangers of normalization. The horror of the past must be preserved while allowing for the possibility of acceptance in the present. As Henry Greenspan comments in his essay, "Testimony and the Rise of Holocaust Consciousness" (1999), "Primo Levi argued that retelling the destruction required a new language–even a new *kind* of language. But the language survivors use is, in actuality, the same as our own. Their references, however, are to memories we do not share, and even their silences, however abrupt and consuming, do not betray their source' (p. 47). It is here that the literary figure of the past, embodied in the character of a ghost or a time-traveller, can sustain two simultaneous time frames. More complex, from this perspective, is the figure of the witness who is also the victim of historical trauma: Primo Levi, in the case of the Holocaust; writers like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, in the case of American slavery.

Greenspan's emphasis upon not only what is said but also what is left unsaid, the silences, of survivor testimony is echoed in his quotation of Elie Weisel: 'Hamlet was just romantic and the question he asked himself too simplistic. The problem is not: to be or not to be. But rather: to be and not to be' (quoted by Greenspan, p. 47). Survivor narratives, a designation that seems appropriate to the autobiographies written by Douglass and Jacobs yet is not applied to slave narratives, are characterized by significant silences like the "veiled" interior experiences that Morrison identifies in early slave narratives. These texts concern what it is like "to be" a slave and "not to be" fully human in the dehumanizing environment of slavery. But the silences of survivor testimony are also of another kind, described by Giorgio Agamben in the opening chapter of *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999) "The Witness," as the lacunae that speak of the impossibility of the act of true witnessing:

> The witness usually testifies in the name of justice and truth and as such his or her speech draws consistency and fullness. Yet here the value of testimony lies essentially in what it lacks; at its center it contains something that cannot be borne witness to and that discharges the survivors of authority. The "true" witnesses, the "complete witnesses," are those who "touched bottom": the Muslims, the drowned. The survivors speak in their stead, by proxy, as pseudo-witnesses to a missing testimony. And yet to speak here of a proxy makes no sense; the drowned have

> nothing to say, nor do they have instructions or memories to be transmitted (p. 34).

Agamben's work is admittedly difficult; however, if students are prepared for the issues he raises through the reading of Morrison's work on memory, Walter Benn Michaels' argument about memory, history, and national identity, and the work of Freud and Dominick LaCapra on the potentially therapeutic role of the witness to historical trauma, then those students possess a sophisticated context within which to place Agamben's complex philosophical arguments. The proposition that only the dead, only those individuals who have suffered to the ultimate degree, can know in all its horror the reality of historical trauma is a restating of the intergenerational problematic of the transmission of trauma. Just as Douglass or Jacobs might be seen as incomplete witnesses to the nature of American slavery, because they were able finally to escape and live to tell their stories, so Morrison and Jacobs are imperfect or "secondary" witnesses (to use LaCapra's term) because they are among those who "came after."

It is important that in the teaching of the slave narrative tradition, or indeed the literature of any historical trauma, that these imperfections and silences and lacunae are preserved. To assimilate survivor testimony to normalizing narratives of history or nationalism or racial memory would be to deny the possibility of "working- through" the past in the interests of the future. Students, like all readers of this literature, must read under the imperative that the past-ness of the past be preserved in all its imperfection even as the impacts of that past upon the present is acknowledged. In the work of African American writers such as those discussed here we find that ethical avoidance of dystopia and utopia alike that Dominick LaCapra describes as a preferred way of reading trauma: "Historical losses or lacks can be dealt with in ways that may significantly improve conditions–indeed effect basic structural transformation–without promising secular salvation or a sociopolitical return to a putatively lost (or lacking) unity or community" (1999, p. 706).

CONCLUSION

In my teaching of African-American Women's Writing I attempt to elude the category of victim/perpetrator or guilt/expiation in favour of education. When designing courses and selecting readings I keep in mind the question: "what is being 'taught' here?" What I endeavour to teach are ethical and moral ways of thinking in relation to such issues as literary language, narrative voice, or point of view, which are aesthetically shaped. Always I have in mind the dangers of unreflecting textual interpretations that risk rescripting stories of trauma and normalizing them. Through the readings I select and the sequence in which I ask students to encounter these readings, I hope to promote awareness of how this is work of normalization goes on in the society around us. Self-understanding is what I aim at promoting in my students and in my own practices as a socially-situated reader. African-American Women's Writing and the slave narrative tradition specifically offers a fertile textual field for the development of more complex and enriched approaches to historical understanding through the reading of literary texts and the critical practices by which we attempt to gain this understanding of the self-in-history.

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