

**Introduction:**  
**On Social Suffering and Its Cultural Construction**

by

Jeffrey C. Alexander and Elizabeth Butler Breese

This book deals with social suffering, with exploitation and violence, with war and genocide, the massacre of innocents, and intense and often gruesome religious, economic, ethnic, and racial strife. These formidable topics do not in themselves render our book distinctive. What distinguishes the contributions that follow is how they approach social suffering's causes and effects. While they are deeply sensitive to the materiality and pragmatics of social suffering, they reject materialist and pragmatic approaches for one centered inside a cultural sociology.

Material forces are, of course, deeply implicated in social suffering, and the practical considerations surrounding traumatic events have significant effects on social organization. Here we are concerned, however, to trace the manner in which these causes and effects are crucially mediated by symbolic representations of social suffering and how such a cultural process channels powerful human emotions. We demonstrate how symbolic-cum-emotional forces are carried by social groups and how together they create powerful, history-changing effects in the worlds of morality, materiality, and organization. Intellectuals, artists, and social movement leaders create narratives of social suffering. They project these as new ideologies that create new ideal interests. Such ideologies and interests can trigger significant repairs in the civil fabric or instigate new rounds of social suffering in turn.

We approach this process of symbolic-cum-emotional representation as a collective, sociological process centering on meaning-making. The construction of collective trauma is often fuelled by individual experiences of pain and suffering, but it is the threat to collective rather than individual identity that defines the kind of suffering at stake. The pivotal question becomes, not who did this to me, but what group did this to us? Intellectuals, political leaders, and symbol creators make different claims about collective identity, about the nature of the wound and what caused it, about the identity of victim and perpetrator, and about what is to be done to prevent the trauma ever from happening again. Conflicting accounts weave protagonist and antagonist into powerful accusatory narratives and project these to audiences of third parties.

Which narrative wins out is not only a matter of performative power. It is also a matter of power and resources, and the demographics of the audiences who are listening. Who can command the most effective platform to tell the trauma story? Some stories are repressed, while others are materially sustained. Some stories are enriched by long-standing traditions; others seem so counterintuitive as scarcely to be believed. Some trauma narratives find willing, able, and homogeneous audiences; other stories are received by fragmented or constricted audiences; still others simply fall on deaf ears.

The emotional experience of suffering is critical, but it is not primordial. To find the meaning of suffering, it must be framed against background expectations. Individual suffering is of extraordinary human, moral, and intellectual concern; in itself, however, it is a matter for psychologists and psychoanalysts, not for the sociological contributors to this book. We are concerned with traumas that become collective, and they can become so only if they are conceived as wounds to social identity. This is a matter of intense

cultural and political work. Suffering collectivities – whether dyads, groups, societies, or civilizations – do not exist simply as material networks. They must be imagined into being.

When social processes construe events as gravely dangerous to groups, social actors transform individual suffering into a matter of collective concern, of cultural worry, group danger, social panic, creeping fear. Individual victims react to traumatic injury with repression and denial, gaining relief when these psychological defenses are overcome, bringing pain into consciousness so they are able to mourn. For collectivities, it is different. Rather than denial, repression, and working through, it is a matter of symbolic construction and framing, of creating a narrative and moving along from there. A “we” must be constructed via narrative and coding, and it is this collective identity that experiences and confronts the danger. Perhaps thousands of people have been killed. Individuals have lost their lives, experiencing intense suffering and pain. These are individual facts. Beyond this point, collective processes of cultural framing decides. Are the massive deaths seen as sacrifices for a legitimate war? Americans who sent soldiers to triumphal victory in the First and Second World Wars did not experience collective trauma, despite the tens of thousands of deaths to men and women they loved and lost. Neither did Germans during their early Blitzkriegs. The reason was that these lost lives, far from endangering American and German collective identities, actually reinforced them. It is when narratives of triumph are challenged, when individual deaths seem worthless or polluted, when those who have fallen are seen not as sacrificing for a noble cause but as wasted victims of irresponsible chicanery, that wars can become traumatic indeed (Giesen 2004).

To transform individual suffering into collective trauma is cultural work. It requires speeches, rituals, marches, meetings, plays, movies, and storytelling of all kinds. Carrier groups tie their material and ideal interests to particular scripts about who did what to whom, and how society must respond if a new collective identity is to be sustained. Historical episodes of social suffering have the potential to trigger dangerous group conflict, but also ameliorating reconciliation. Lost wars, economic depressions, mass murders of every conceivable ethnic, racial, and religious stripe – such social events can be understood according to drastically varying accounts and can be made to imply sharply antithetical social prescriptions. This cultural work produces spirals of symbolic signification, signifying processes that are mediated by institutional structures and uneven distributions of wealth and power. Are we struggling over the nature of collective trauma in the field of party conflict, in a court of law, in the mass media, or on a theatrical stage? Do the cultural entrepreneurs' stories have access to the means of symbolic production? Even the most compelling trauma narratives must reach outside themselves. Power and resources are terribly important here, even if they alone will not decide.

In an earlier work, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, the senior editors of this volume helped work out a foundational theory of collective trauma.<sup>1</sup> We invited contributors to the present volume to elaborate and apply this theory to new social contexts, and to revise it and change it in their own distinctive ways. Our earlier work generated some controversy, both in its insistence on differentiating collective from individual trauma and in its suggestion that emotional experience is channeled via cultural processes relatively independent of the trauma's social origins.

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<sup>1</sup> Cite 2004

We believe these foundational positions are sustained in the case studies that follow, even as new propositions are proffered, theoretical territory extended, and new conceptual connections are forged.

*Individual Suffering Is Separate from Collective Representation*

In their chapter on the controversial bombing war against German cities during World War II, Volker Heins and Andreas Langenohl vividly demonstrate that massive suffering of many individuals does not create collective trauma. They open their account by providing an overview of magnitude of the suffering of the German people, both soldiers and civilians:

More than five million soldiers were killed, most of them on the eastern front. Those who survived in the war in the east were often wounded, half-crazed or frostbitten, and were further decimated by the harsh conditions in Soviet POW camps. British and American bombers attacked more than one hundred German cities and town, reducing many of them to a sea of rubble, killing around six-hundred-thousand civilians, and making many more homeless. Millions of ethnic Germans who had settled in Poland or Czechoslovakia fled the onslaught of the Red Army, or were expelled by the newly established communist governments. On their way to Berlin and in the fallen capital itself, Soviet soldiers raped altogether perhaps one and a half million women.

In the immediate postwar period, and indeed for many years afterward, individuals recorded these massive sufferings in photographs, in personal diaries, and in family conversations, and often made these public. In heavily bombed cities such as Hamburg, the bombardment was commemorated in local official ceremonies. Their painful experiences were not silenced, as some have claimed. Yet, these representations of the bombings never amounted to an authoritative representation orienting collective political and moral perceptions.

Why was it that the suffering experienced by Germans in this period—their individual traumatic experiences—did not become a cultural trauma? The explanation Heins and Langenohl offer is simple and clear: Commemorating air raids as a trauma for the national collectivity would have conflicted with the trauma narrative postwar Germany constructed when it was occupied by those who had perpetrated the injuries. The trauma construction in post-war Germany centered on the harm that the Germans had done to others. The Holocaust-centered, war-guilt narrative became even stronger after the occupation, forming the core of democratic Germany’s collective identity in the decades afterward, right up until today. It was this new moral frame that allowed German national identity to rise from the ashes of World War II, and it did not allow the individual injuries that millions of Germans suffered at the hands of the Allies to become the nation’s collective narration. German had to be represented as perpetrator; neither individual Germans nor their nation could be portrayed as victim. It was the nation’s mass murder of the Jews, not the German people’s own deaths, which needed constituting as the primary injury at stake.

Germans saw their own misery filtered through a sense of what had been done to others in their name ... The memory of the bombing war has not been turned into a national or ‘cultural trauma’ ... Germans learned to connect their suffering to the suffering of others. They remember that their cities were firebombed and often completely flattened by identifiable actors, but it is not this fact in itself that is remembered and commemorated as a psychologically searing, identity-changing event ... Germans no longer felt entitled to speak of themselves as victims ... The Allied bombing of German cities during World War II – that has not become a cultural trauma, not even for the successor generations of the victim group.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In *Doctor Faustus*, symbolically situated and actually written in the waning years of the WWII and published just after its conclusion, Thomas Mann (1997 [1947]) contests the right of Germans to protest against the “earth-shaking, plummeting havoc” that not only killed hundreds of thousands of Germans but ended its claim to represent *kultur*: “We have experienced the destruction of our venerable cities from the air – an act that would scream to the heavens were not we who suffer it ourselves laden with guilt. But

Yet, while such a refusal laid the groundwork for moral redemption, it was neither sociologically determined nor socially consensual. Many Germans commemorated their soldiers' suffering at the Battle of Stalingrad well into the 1960s; it was only the rise to preeminence of Holocaust memory that made such trauma construction of German military sacrifice impossible. In the eastern city of Dresden, so horribly destroyed by the infamous firebombing, controversial efforts by left and right to sustain anti-American and anti-British narratives of German World War II suffering continue today; however, as Heins and Langenohl argue, these narratives will not rise, in the foreseeable future, to the level of symbolic condensation necessary for a cultural trauma to emerge.

Total war, an objective event of staggering empirical significance, demands the countless loss of individual life and enormous expenditure of national treasure. Its narration as triumph or trauma depends, however, on whether these sacrifices are deemed to have contributed to collective glory or to have been wasted in vain. As in post-Nazi Germany, postwar Japan considered its national society to have been gravely wounded by defeat. Japan's postwar storytellers did not, however, separate the new nation from the old trauma in Germany's radical and insistent way. In her account of Japan's trauma process, Akiko Hashimoto insists that empirical referent does not determine signification.

The horrendous event emerges as a significant *referent* in the collective consciousness, not because it is in some way naturally ineffaceable but because it generates a structure of discourse that normalizes it in collective life ... Wars, massacres, atrocities, invasions, and other instances of mass violence can become significant referents for subsequent collective life not because of the gruesome nature of the events *per se*, but because people choose to make them especially relevant to who they are and what it

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since we are[,] the scream dies in the air and, like King Claudius's prayer, can 'never to heaven go.' How strange that lament for culture, raised now against crimes that we called down upon ourselves, sounds in the mouths of those who entered the arena of history proclaiming themselves bearers of a barbarism that, while wallowing in ruthlessness, was to rejuvenate the world" (p. 184).

means to be a member of that society. Some events therefore become more crucially significant than others, because we manage to make them more consequential in later years for our understanding of ourselves and our own society. (original italics)

Hashimoto devotes attention to the supra-material symbolization of Japanese defeat.

“August 15, 1945, has come to represent not strictly the end of a military conflict,” she writes, “but the cultural trauma of a fallen national, the collapse of the nation’s social and moral order, and the failed aspirations of an East Asian Empire.” Yet, even while “epitomizing a rupture of national history rather than the strictly military event”—a rupture that allows a “radical departure from a stigmatized past”—who exactly were the traumatic event’s perpetrators and who its victims are not determined by simply establishing such a narrative break. The autonomy of representation and referent means that the characters of a rupture narrative can be filled in sharply different ways: “The war was wrong, but there is also sufficient elasticity here in assigning the blame to different agents and causes, from the Emperor and colonial aggression, to incompetent military strategists and self-serving Western powers.”

When Rui Gao investigates Maoist reconstructions of Chinese suffering, her account also demonstrates that individual wounds and collective representations are not by any means necessarily intertwined. Why did Maoism largely ignore what Chinese people suffered at the hands of Japanese armed forces during World War II? The lack of cultural construction cannot be attributed to the dearth of painful experience. Certainly, the latter was sufficiently massive and horrible to trigger trauma on a large scale:

The millions of Chinese people who had the misfortune of living through the War of Resistance Against Japan (hereafter “the War”) experienced nearly unbearable trauma and pain. From 1937 to 1945, during the 8 years of the War, China lost three million lives in combat, and civilian casualties were estimated to be about twenty million. The heinous nature of the war



atrocities committed by the invading army must have left indelible marks on the consciousness of millions of war victims. Indeed, the notorious Nanking Massacre, the crimes of No. 731 Special Forces, and the forced conscription of 'comfort women' are but three particularly atrocious cases of trauma inflicted by the Japanese army.

In order to explain Maoism's silence about these massively painful experiences Gao traces symbolization, more precisely the lack thereof. "Such vivid and massively shared suffering and injustice," Gao writes, "remained ultimately private and individual. For many years after the building of the People's Republic of China, this suffering seldom found its way into the public sphere of expression."

To understand why millions of brutal individual experiences were not translated into collective representation, Gao examines the carrier group of postwar Chinese trauma, the nation's revolutionary and newly triumphant Communist party. She finds its ideal interests lay elsewhere. Rather than create a national narrative pitting Chinese victims against war-mongering Japanese, the ruling party focused on its own suffering and on the pain experienced by the class that it fought to sustain. According to the revolutionary trauma narrative of Maoism, it was Chinese landlords who inflicted collective pain, not the Japanese; and it was the party and the proletariat who were the victims, not the Chinese people per se. These New China storytellers projected "the intense trauma-drama of class struggle... That is, perpetrators in the old society epitomized an absolutely evil class enemy." If this alternative trauma story were successful, it would justify the leadership of the communist party: The "suffering of the proletariat victims" could be "represented symbolically and emotionally as suffering shared by a broad group of people, united regardless of national boundaries in a new universal class collectivity." The riddle of Maoist silence can now be solved. It is because the "the experience of the

War... ‘unfits’ with this grand narrative of ‘class trauma’” that the “emergence of the War as a collective trauma was effectively ‘inhibited’ by the trauma of class struggle.”<sup>3</sup>

Ivana Spasic similarly separates Serbians’ actual experience of the “trauma of Kosovo” from its symbolic figuration. “If asked what distinguishes them as a nation,” Spasic writes, “most Serbs would tell you it is the memory of the Battle of Kosovo, fought between the Serbian army and the forces of Ottoman Turks in 1389.” It is from this “Kosovo sore, wound or pain, as it is usually called” that “the sorrowful but proud feeling of tragedy, death and loss engendered by remembrance” that are “generally held to be the foundation of Serbian identity” is sustained. For her part, Spasic questions whether that earlier traumatic event ever actually happened, at least as Serbians have remembered it. To understand the Serbian experience of trauma, she argues, requires a cultural turn, moving “from blood to referent.” “When referring to ‘Kosovo’,” she explains, we are speaking of “the symbolic, abstract meaning, not Kosovo as a real place.”

Viewed as narrative rather than event, “Kosovo” is far from straight-forward. Describing “the symbolism of Kosovo” as “ambiguous and open-ended,” Spasic finds “many gaps, loops, double-entendres and other discursive plays.”

Trauma may be seen as a speech act, a continually discursively produced condition which stands in mutually constitutive relations with the contextual circumstances. In this sense, it is ‘there’ as a cultural meaning-structure, Eyerman’s “referent” or Zivkovic’s “entrenched story.”

It is the myth’s rhetorical success rather than Serbians’ actual experiences of pain that is “responsible for the Myth’s enduring power.” Spasic challenges the idea that “trauma is

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<sup>3</sup> For how this trauma process prevented the Nanking massacre from becoming a postwar focal point in local and global discussions of genocide, see Alexander and Gao, “xxxxx,” in xxx, *Oxford Handbook of Cultural Sociology*.

actively *felt* by people, that it is located somehow within them, that it affects them uniformly and unavoidably” (original italics). Collectively constructed, trauma is located inside of cultural structures, and it is these narratives, not the actual experience of real events, that has the capacity to inflict collective pain: “Over the centuries, the thematic cluster of Kosovo has become a (potentially) traumatizing interpretive framework readily available to Serbs for making sense of their collective experiences.”

For contemporary Serbians, the paradox and tragedy of the Kosovo myth derives from this chasm between individual experience and collective construction. In their “more personalized and private discourse,” Spasic contends, Serbs display a “rationalism and open-mindedness” that could lay the basis for more “realistic” foreign relations. Today, however, “with the verbal stakes rising, it has become all but impossible to talk about Kosovo, real as well as symbolic, in anything but the most elevated tone.” The result is that, while “people harbor all kinds of doubts and grudges against the symbolic prevalence of Kosovo and its impingements on current Serbian politics,” they “feel extremely uncomfortable expressing them in public, or even to themselves, because the sacredness of the topic has been so extremely enhanced.”

The distinction between private experiences of suffering, shame, and defeat and the public expression, signification, and symbolization of trauma stands at the core of Nicolas Demertzis's history of the social and political aftermath of the Greek civil war (1944-1949, though, as Demertzis advises, this periodization is controversial). The suffering brought about by the bloody war among members of the same national and ethnic community, Demertzis explains, was linguistically, emotionally, and politically difficult—and for a time impossible—to publicly express in Greece. Regarding

individual, psychological trauma, we speak of the repression of memories and experiences. Cultural traumas, as not only Demertzis but also Bartmanski and Eyerman in their chapter on the Katyn Massacre explain, may follow such periods of silence, exclusion, and oblivion. Private pain and loss can be excluded from the public realm and silenced by the state, as in the case of the Katyn Massacre. In Greece, however, "the veil of silence was socially imposed but not directly enforced by a repressive state apparatus." The social forces imposing the "veil of silence" were effective nevertheless. The conflict was not given a name, was not even signified in the weakest sense. Without a public vocabulary or public recognition, individuals experienced shame and confusion within their most intimate spheres: their families.

Demertzis's chapter begins with a moving account of his "hard-working" and "honest" father's inability to answer the opaque yet crushing accusations of previously-committed sins leveled by his elder son. In the cultural trauma of the Katyn Massacre too, Bartmanski and Eyerman explain, the family plays a crucial role. The family is the site of grieving for a lost father, brother, or husband and it is a unit isolated from society; the truth of the identity of the perpetrators, known to most if not all of the families, was aggressively distorted by the state and concealed in public life. Families who lost a member in the Katyn Massacre and participants in the Greek civil war hold memories and emotions as individuals and as families that may become part of the cultural collective trauma once the political or social climate allows for public symbolization and wider signification. The period of silence, exclusion, and oblivion is not only a period of being "on hold"; such prevention of more public narrations may become part of the broader social trauma itself. Indeed, Bartmanski and Eyerman find their title in the words of the

daughter of a man killed at Katyn: "the worst was the silence." As both Bartmanski and Eyerman's and Demertzis's studies make clear, it was not certain in either case that individual and family experience would become traumas for the broader collectivity. Not all silences become spoken; not all personal anguish becomes collective trauma.

The chapters about trauma construction in Colombia and South Africa reveal the same independence of collective construction from personal experience, a separation that allows not only for moral reckoning but for these lessons to be pushed in more inclusive or more reactionary directions.

In Colombia, writes Carlo Tognato, the battle waged by the left-wing FARC against the Colombian state constitutes the longest-standing guerilla conflict in the world, and it is largely financed from kidnappings that have imposed extraordinary individual suffering on the Colombian people. "Just between January 1996, and June 2008," according to Tognato, "approximately twenty-four-thousand people have been kidnapped," and "by June 2008, almost three thousand were still in the hands of their captors and almost fourteen hundred had died in captivity." Yet, despite these extraordinary afflictions, "Colombians have been traditionally quite indifferent to the suffering of the kidnap victims."

In a letter to his family, one of the kidnapped, Coronel Mendieta, writes: "It is not physical pain that paralyzes me, or the chains around my neck that torment me, but the mental agony, the evil of the evil and the indifference of the good, as if we were not worth anything, as if we did not exist."

It is not inevitable that massive individual suffering will produce a collective trauma process, much less an ameliorating social narrative to repair social fragmentation. "The Colombia case bears witness," Tognato observes, "to the fact that the view of human

suffering does not automatically trigger solidarity for the victims.” Yet, while not automatic, it remains possible. Tognato describes how dramatic new symbolic performances by anti-kidnapping demonstrators and civil activists have challenged Colombia’s desperate political situation in progressive and democratic ways.

In his examination of refugees in South Africa, Ari Sitas addresses the pain Africans have suffered in post-colonial societies. “Since 1994, a stream of refugees has arrived in South Africa from a number of conflict zones on the African continent,” and they have “fled from frightening scenes of violence and war in their countries.” Sitas conceptualizes the most outspoken and politicized among these refugees as, at least potentially, an intellectual carrier group. He interprets their discourse as an effort to give meaning to the suffering of their fellow citizens, reading their political demands as efforts to repair the searing strains that undermine peace in the nations from which they flee. In their speeches and writings, members of this carrier group in *status ascendi* speak of “isikhala—a polysemic word which borders almost on the Marxian concept of alienation, of homelessness, pain and suffering.” As Sitas understands it, however, this discourse about pain “is not [about] a personal experience,” not about “what happened to the individual... as such.” Instead, “the performance listed general details—the kind of misdeeds, rapes, hackings, stabbings, burnings, shootings, bombs that happened.” Yet, even as “the killer neighbor ... is invoked” in a generalized and abstract manner, there is “a question left hanging.” It is this: “Who put the knife in his or her hand?”

When their narration comes to this question, the refugees’ trauma constructions veer sharply away from the actual experiences of victims and the actual actions of perpetrators. The spiral of signification is deflected by the long standing trauma

framework that that fuelled the African anti-colonial movement in an earlier day. Rather than pointing to post-colonial African perpetrators, refugees refer to “the vintage formulation” of Africa “as a continent of humanism, sociality and equality before the European pillage.” With Africa entering the collective imagination as pure victim, the refugees tell a story whose “key trauma [is] constructed around slavery, racism and, after the late 19<sup>th</sup> century imperial scramble for its resources, colonialism.” According to Sitas, narrating the old white-man-as-perpetrator story – of “the transatlantic experience of slavery and into the forms of forced/corvee labour on the continent of mines and plantations—it was about the suffering of servitude and it was about real and metaphorical bondage” – misses what must be the contemporary point.

The acknowledgement of suffering then slid invariably towards the White Man as a perpetrator in the imaginary—nothing specific—“he” as a trans-historical entity, a Manichean counterpoint. Nothing about the Interhamwe on Rwandan lips, of Mobutu or the various factions of the Congo, of the Derg or the Amharas, of the Warlords was ever mentioned but a broad context of the White origins of a suffering.

Sitas finds this “a disturbing construction” because so imagining perpetrator and victim avoids addressing the African sources of post-colonial suffering and prevents, at the same time, a cosmopolitan resolution. It “asserts an ‘unassimilable other-ness’ from the rest of the world,” homogenizing the imaginary of a terribly divided continent and making wider solidarity with outsiders impossible. Trauma, victim, and perpetrator are identified and interrelated in a distorted and particularistic rather than realistic and morally responsible manner. While “the interviewees agree that the agencies of violence of conflict are African and African-led,” Sitas explains, “the cohorts, power-elites, [and]

rulers who come to benefit from it are seen as ‘corrupted’ or better, ‘the corrupted.’” In this rhetorical construction, there is an abdication of responsibility.

The inflection is important as corrupt is not so much a personal attribute as the result of pressure from external forces. In this way, the problem of corruption is not owned but instead fingers are pointed at inflictors of the problem—not corrupt, but corrupted. It refuses to own “the” problem. “They” have been victims of external forces and/or internal servants of external forces.

This narrative points to “remote-control colonialism” as having “spawned tribalism and ethnic strife,” ignoring Africa’s own selfish and misguided elites, the groups that are actually responsible for the most recent impositions of trauma and pain. Such constricted trauma construction closes off the social space for attacking contemporary African suffering, to demand the kinds of social changes that would reconstruct African societies in more civil manner—the kind of radical change that Sitas himself has advocated throughout his own intellectual-cum-activist career.

That processes of symbolic representation establish and mediate the nature of collective suffering is the ground bass of cultural trauma theory. From it follows a series of more specific sociological propositions: cultural agents are central, collective trauma dramas are performed rather than simply described, and trauma dramas have material repercussions.

### *Cultural Agents Are Central*

Meanings do not come out of thin air. Webs of signification are spun by culture creators. Here we mean most centrally to point to the work of novelists, painters, poets, movie directors and television producers, comic book scribes, and intellectuals. The category of cultural agent would also include other kinds of publicly-oriented speech acts as well, for example, the factual claims making of lawyers, forensic scientists, academics,



and politicians. We mean to highlight, not the epistemological status of truth claims, but the agency with which every claim to reality, whether ostensibly factual or fictional, must be made. From a cultural-sociological perspective, the difference between factual and fictional statements is not an Archimedean point. Cultural trauma theory is post-foundational. Yet, while the spiral of signification is not rational, it is intentional. The spiral is spun by individual and group carriers. It is people who make traumatic meanings, though they do so in circumstances which they have not themselves created and which they do not fully comprehend.

The more conservative and heroic version of postwar Japanese trauma discourse, Akiko Hashimoto tells us, was crystallized by Yoshida Mitsuru's best-selling non-fiction memoir *Requiem for Battleship Yamato*. One of the few survivors of a tactically meaningless suicide sortie only months before Japan's defeat, Mitsuru dramatically recounted the naval officer Captain Usubuchi's emotional framing of imminent defeat as patriotic sacrifice, not only his own and his 3000 crew members but of Japan itself. "We will lead the way," the captain is purported to have proclaimed; "we will die as harbingers of Japan's new life." While acknowledging defeat and drawing a sharp line in historical time, such trauma narration does not actually make Japan's war regime impure, as Hashimoto explains: "In Yoshida's rendering, the courage and discipline of the men facing certain death are emphasized, without blame or resentment directed toward the state leadership that ordered the tactically dubious 'special attack' mission with no fuel to return home." Hashimoto traces how this conservative pattern of trauma signification, first crystallized in a best-selling book, spiraled along the aestheticized pathways of

popular culture and into the political sphere, with immense social and political consequence.

Progressive Japanese countered this conservative, justificatory trauma reconstruction via narratives of equally dramatic coloration. The aesthetic power of such leftist counter-narratives made them massively popular. “At the height of the Vietnam War,” Hashimoto recounts, “an artist of the wartime generation penned mortifying stories that would become some of the most iconic anti-war literature in postwar Japan.”

Nakazawa Keiji’s semi-autobiographical comic *Barefoot Gen* told the story, not of heroic defeat in military battle, but of the tragic nuclear obliteration of a city, Hiroshima. The narrative constructs a civil rather than military protagonist, telling the story from the perspective of a family’s day-to-day survival after the atomic bomb:

Gen’s father and sister died in the nuclear blast under [their] collapsed house, but Gen, his mother and brothers narrowly escaped. His mother was pregnant and gave birth to Gen’s sister on the day of the blast amid the wreckage. Thereafter, for ten volumes, Gen survives hunger and poverty, loss of his mother and sister, humiliation and fear, illness and discrimination, exploitation and crimes.

Keiji’s comic novel graphically portrays the physical suffering of individuals -- “charred bodies, people with torn skin hanging from their faces and limbs, eyeballs dangling from their sockets and maggots hatching on corpses, heaps of burned dead bodies in the river and elsewhere all over the scorched flattened city.” Yet *Gen* depicts the antagonists responsible for this suffering as forces of a decidedly collective kind, groups whose right-wing politics must be defeated for peace to once again reign. “In Nakazawa’s rendering,” writes Hashimoto, “the war was brought on recklessly and unnecessarily by the Japanese military and the Imperial state that heartlessly and ineptly misled civilians to deathly destruction and suffering.” Gen’s father, Hashimoto explains,

"serves as a spiritual background of the story," as he represents the possibility of a clear-eyed comprehension and rejection of the Imperialist forces that invited the violence upon its own people. This left-wing political understanding is not made didactically via truth claims but aesthetically, via narrative resolution. Psychological identification with an esteemed moral protagonist allows the civil anti-war argument to be made and a new, more critical moral position to be extended.

*Gen*'s symbolic reenactments of trauma drama inside the popular imagination were "the most influential and iconic anti-war literature to reach successive postwar generations and shape popular consciousness about the horrendous consequences of militarism in the past four decades." The manga volumes became the "vehicle for intergenerational transmission of anti-war sentiments." Hashimoto sees *Gen* as a Japanese "equivalent of Anne Frank's story," an immensely influential work "that mobilizes empathy and pity" and whose "reinforcement effect works over the generational cycle."

In their study of "what came to be called the Katyn Massacre," Bartmanski and Eyerman carefully detail the tangled, distorted, and fraught history of the killing of 14,500 Polish military officers and over 7,000 other Polish citizens—representing a significant segment of the elite, professional class of Polish society—by the Soviet army in April 1940. Three years later, when some of the corpses were discovered, the Soviets blamed the Germans for perpetrating the mass killing. This is the basic story the Soviets would claim for decades, with various levels of tenacity, official decree, and threats to the families involved. In the meantime, most if not all of the families knew the truth: members of the Soviet army had killed their husbands, fathers, brothers, sons, uncles, and

nephews. Knowledge of the truth needed to remain unspoken, under threat of losing access to education, jobs, and a public life without harassment in Poland. It remained, for several decades, a personal sorrow and burden rather than a trauma that could be collectively felt and talked about. They write, "Cultural trauma became possible only when the directly affected individuals and communities were able to express themselves, verbally and visually, in a sustained way and project their personal tragedies onto the larger moral screen of the nation." Literal screens—ones that show films— as well as literature played a crucial role in the extension of the trauma of the massacre and of the distortion of the truth from the affected families to the Polish people and beyond.

The transformation of "Katyn" from an occurrence known to a few to a symbol of Polish collective suffering depended on families becoming cultural agents "creating and sustaining the trauma narrative" and on "intellectuals/politicians" who, after official suppression ended, could also create, sustain, and spread the symbolization of "Katyn". One of the most prominent of these intellectual carriers is the well-known film director Andrzej Wajda, who depicted Katyn in a film in 2007. Wajda (2008) emphasized the importance of "*showing* Katyn to the world" and aimed at triggering moral and cultural shock. The film's plotting technique moved from the actual victims of the Soviets' mass murder to the suffering of their families, especially the wives and the sisters of the victims. Bartmanski and Eyerman elaborate:

Wajda, whose father was among those murdered in Kharkov, visualizes this aspect and reveals through it the cold-blooded destruction of a particular life-world. By shifting the attention from the soldiers themselves to those who loved them and whose loss was publicly unrecognized, he makes the extension of sentiments and identification possible, and thereby reveals the existential depth of the Katyn trauma. Staging the women as Antigones can be seen an instantiation of intertextuality that renders the story potentially generalizable.

The performance of trauma via theatrical staging is the focus of Elizabeth Breese's examination of performances of *Waiting for Godot* in the devastated urban settings of New Orleans and Sarajevo. While acknowledging that “claims to fact” are indeed performative assertions that may not themselves “correspond to something ‘real’,” Breese distinguishes between factual and aesthetic trauma claims. Breese concentrates on how “carrier groups and social actors use art, in addition to claims to fact, to construct claims to trauma” in order to illuminate the inner-workings of dramatic performance.

Through expressive and artistic performance, social actors represent elements of their experience and construct them as traumatic. Painting, dance, song, film, and drama do not accuse in the political or juridical realm; social actors use artistic productions to ‘speak for’ and to construct trauma ... The productions of *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo and New Orleans are social performances whose ‘success’ is not achieved in the register of factual truth. Like Picasso’s *Guernica* and other artistic constructions and claims to trauma, the success, or ‘re-fusion,’ of the social performance of trauma through *Godot* is achieved in the register of expressive aptness.

For Breese, *Godot* becomes a laboratory in which to examine how the dramatic logics of cultural traumas get formulated; how their crystallization separates symbolic retellings from their actual point of origin; how such dramatic narrations subsequently are evoked in other, not precisely similar, situations; and how these iterations have the potential to make concretely different situations seem the same, giving meaning to collective wounds via an iconic drama’s performative effect. Working inside this laboratory of aesthetic innovation, Breese can offer a new reading of Beckett’s most famous play. It was “born out of Beckett’s personal trauma” of exile during Nazi occupation,” she suggests, and also from “the mood of collective trauma in Paris following the war.” The master-slave pairing of Pozzo and Lucky, and the coupling of the desperate but ever

hopeful Vladimir and Estragon, were “rendered and read in Paris as a reference to the collective trauma of Parisians at the time.” Instead of *Godot* as absurd drama without reference, Breese sees Beckett’s “famously ‘meaningless’ play” as something utterly different – an artistic rendering of the trauma-filled twentieth century.

Beckett’s trauma-text gained worldwide fame for aesthetic reasons that were social at the same time. By its spare and careful plot, oblique dialogue, and minimalist staging, the play moves from the specifics of a concrete situation to the essential tensions of the human condition. Yet, like every trauma narrative, drama, to gain traction in particular trauma situation *Godot* must be implanted in a concrete time and place. Here Breese gives to audience an active role.

Audiences and producers insert meanings ... by specifying victims, perpetrators, and the nature of their trauma ... The audiences to these productions of *Waiting for Godot* pronounced the performances a success or failure based on the performances’ ability to express and depict the experiences of the residents in each city ... Audiences expect the actors to embody Vladimir and Estragon, sure, but there was a simultaneous expectation that they personify the residents of the city as well.

In New Orleans and Sarajevo, Breese demonstrates, successful performances of *Godot* “turned theater performance into social performance of trauma.” This is, of course, exactly what every cultural creator hopes their performance will be.

#### *Trauma Dramas Are Performed, not Described*

Collective traumas are reflections neither of individual suffering nor actual event, but symbolic renderings that reconstruct and imagine them in a relatively independent way. This spiral of signification is the work of culture creators, who create scripts that answer the four “w” questions: what happened, who were its victims, who were its perpetrators, and what can be done. These scripts are not descriptions of what is; they are

arguments for what must have been and, at least implicitly, of what should be. The truth of cultural scripts emerges, not from their descriptive accuracy, but from the power of their enactment. Trauma scripts are performed as symbolic actions in the theatres of everyday collective life. In Serbia, the crisis of the 1980s began with Milosevic's supposedly factual and certainly highly expressive, virulently nationalist speech commemorating the Serbia's defeat by the Islamic forces in a largely mythical war. In postwar Germany, a turning point in trauma construction arrived with the sentimental but compelling fictional television series *Holocaust*. In the wake of the Sabra and Shatila massacres after Israeli's 1982 Lebanon War, it was not only the public war of words between right-wing Likud officials and their Peace Now critics that allowed the Holocaust narrative to be extended to Palestinians for the first time. It was the extraordinary and unprecedented ritual of the "400,000 protest," the spectacle of hundreds of thousands of patriotic but outraged Israelis massively protesting in a Tel Aviv square.<sup>4</sup>

Rui Gao's analysis of China's "Speaking Bitterness" campaigns provides a particularly vivid illustration of trauma texts in their performative mode. From the early 1950s onward, the CCP's narrative of interclass trauma were consummated in what Rui Gao describes as an "ubiquitous performative mechanism where the drama was not only written and read, but also performed and recited by real people on a daily basis." Consecutive national campaigns demanded "struggle meetings," rituals of confrontation that were "enacted at all levels up from the local communities." In a "Speaking Bitterness" performance, "the 'drama' could be literally put on show and the 'bitterness' reenacted on a 'stage.'" The trauma script of bitterness "rose beyond cognitive argument

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<sup>4</sup> See Alexander and Dromi below, chapter XX.

and demanded the acute physical presence, emotional involvement and performative action of the audience.” In the 1960s, Chinese junior high school textbooks contained what purport to be descriptions of the actual proceedings of a bitterness ritual called “Struggling Han Lao Liu.” In her interpretation of this event, Gao emphasizes the salience of “the absolute coding and weighting of the chief antagonist, the target of the struggle, landlord Han.”

When the meeting began, the landlord was brought to the center of the courtyard where a certain kind of stage was set for the “struggle,” and one by one, people who felt that they had been wrong, oppressed, or persecuted by the landlord came up to the stage to give a public testimony to the unforgivable sins of the evildoer. The ritual started as the first figure, a young man named Yan San, stepped into the central stage. He testified that Han had once attempted to force him [to work] as a slave laborer for the Japanese colonizers, and when he refused and ran away, Han retaliated by sending his mum into prison [and she] eventually died there. “I want to take my revenge for my mum today!” as Yang San bellowed with anger,” the chapter goes; “people around all cried out, ‘Let’s beat him to death!’ and started to push forwards with sticks to the center of the courtyard.” “Their chorus,” it goes on, was like “the thunder of spring roaring in the sky” .... When the last bitterness speaker finished her story by yelling “give me back my son!” it was written that “men and women all pushed forward, crying that they want their sons, husbands, fathers, brothers back. And the sounds of weeping, crying, beating and cursing all mixed together.” Indeed, the scene was so intense and moving that Xiao Wang, a young member of the land reform team who came from outside the village, “kept wiping his tears with the back of his hand.”

In their study of Greek identity and the partition of the island of Cyprus, Roudometof and Christou address what Hashimoto calls "intergenerational transmission" of trauma constructions. They ask: how is it that people yearn to return to a home and a homeland which they themselves have never known? The question itself reveals that the experience of displacement of Greek Cypriots from the north of the island to the south is not an individual trauma, but a collective one. Roudometof and Christou describe the commemorative practices, especially within Greek Cypriot schools, which serve to



introduce children to the trauma of separation from their homeland and narrate it as the trauma of all Greek Cypriots, for those who moved from their homes to the southern part of Cyprus as well as for successive generations. "For Greek Cypriots," Roudometof and Christou write, "the experience of *uprootedness* and the vision of a mythical *day of return* are the two major characteristics of the '1974' cultural trauma." The collective trauma of leaving behind their original lands—always remembered as beautiful, fertile lands—and the hope of returning to them is integrated into many facets of school, from classroom decorations to school assemblies; "the whole curriculum," Roudometof and Christou explain, "is infused with references to the problem of occupation." In the Greek Cypriot school curriculum, as in religious rituals and in popular culture, the partition of Cyprus is not merely described as a problem of politics or property; it is performed as a problem of Greek Cypriot identity.

In Colombia, purely textual narrations of the trauma suffered by the thousands of innocent kidnap victims seemed largely without performative effect. A 33-year old computer science engineer named Oscar Morales responded with horror and sympathy to an iconic representation of the suffering—a ghostly image of Ingrid Betancourt, the French victim of FARC guerillas photographed in the jungle chained to a tree. Morales created a Facebook page called "One Million Voices against the FARC," calling for a protest march that eventually drew ten million people into the streets in 115 cities around the world. An even more dramatic portrait of the narrative enactment of trauma in Colombia is the story Tognato tells about Gustavo Moncayo, the 55-year old high school teacher who in 2006 began publicly to wear chains at his wrists and neck to protest FARC's kidnapping of his son. A year later, after FARC assassinated eleven regional

congressmen in captivity, Moncayo set out on foot for Bogota in what became a nationally arresting pilgrimage of protest.

He started his march in the middle of a generalized neglect and without support of any institution – social, political, religious or economic. But then he managed to catch public attention. The media would accompany him along the track. People impatiently awaited his arrival. They applauded him, hugged, touched him, took photos with him, asked for autographs, dedicated local folk songs to him, donated money, and offered food. ... Towards the end of his march, his arrival [in Bogota] was announced on the radio and schools would stop their classes. The march lasted forty-six days. Even the FARC acknowledged that his gesture was “valiant.” When he got to Bogota, Moncayo met with the President and the Mayor of the city. At the end of 2007, he was awarded the National Peace Prize. Though his painful march did not manage to obtain the liberation of his son, he managed ... to command the attention and the solidarity of broad and diverse segments of the Colombian society.

*Trauma Dramas Have “Material” Repercussions:*

*Polarization or Reconciliation?*

The relative independence of collective narration of trauma from individual experience and historical event, the intervening agency of culture creators, the performative impact of textual enactment – these social facts explain why and how trauma dramas have such extraordinarily powerful effects on the organization and structure of our social worlds. Would Germany have engaged in such democratic and pro-Western politics if the Allies’ wartime city bombs rather than the Holocaust had become central to its postwar collective identity? Would an economically empowered Japan have chosen to remain demilitarized if its own postwar trauma dramas, from nationalist to cosmopolitan, had not enshrined war in such a polluted way? Would Maoism have achieved such sustained legitimacy, despite its political repression and disastrous economic policies, if class-trauma had not been so strenuously narrated and so relentlessly performed? Would Serbia have invaded its neighbors and so threatened its

Islamic minority if the Kosovo Myth had not aligned its struggle for collective identity in such a xenophobic and militaristic way? Simply to ask these questions is see how the cultural constructions of trauma often play out in world-historical ways.

Trauma dramas can be consensual or polarizing. In the former, they may lead to social reconciliation; in the latter, to divisive conflict and traumatic injury on a wider scale. Institutionalizing a dominant trauma narrative is a singular social accomplishment. It stabilizes not only collective memory but the contemporary sense of social reality, pointing the way forward in a confident way. Unfortunately, this seems to be the exception rather than the rule in the history of injuries that has afflicted humanity's collective life.

Perhaps more than any other bloody event in the last century's dark history, the Holocaust would seem to qualify as an event whose meaning cannot be open to doubt or contestation. Yet, while the Holocaust was certainly experienced as an indelible horror by its Jewish victims, its collective configuration has been contingent and shifting. For the Western non-Jewish community, the Nazi mass murder was initially understood within the context of the Second World War, as perhaps the most brutal but still representative incident of that world wide mid-century war. Over time, symbolization began shifting from a war crime rooted in a particular time and space to a universal event of such singular evil that it moved beyond history and territory to become a moral lesson "for all mankind." The legendary status of the Holocaust as a sacred evil inspired international human rights laws, new restrictions on national sovereignty, and newly powerful moral strictures against ethnic and racial cleansing.

Yet, even as this markedly universalizing construction became ever more deeply institutionalized in Western Europe and North America, the Holocaust came to be configured in a radically particularistic manner in Israel and the Middle East. For Arab nations neighboring the new Jewish nation, for occupied Palestinians inside Israel or in exile, and for radical Islamicists the world wide, the Holocaust's reality was fiercely challenged and the extraordinary nature of Jewish trauma ridiculed and denied. Meanwhile, inside the boundaries of the Jewish state, religiously conservative Jews and politically right-wing Zionists came to understand the Holocaust as a tragedy that was unique to the Jewish people, not as a tragedy of our times. This Israeli version of the Holocaust trauma drama reinforced ethnic and religious boundaries rather pointing to the necessity for transcending them. Because it would be foolish for Jews to trust the world, they would need their own state, and they must exercise eternal vigilance against Arabs, Islamicists, and especially Palestinian Arabs, whose very existence constituted a permanent threat to the Jewish state from the outside. Jeff Alexander and Shai Dromi describe "a self-justifying, narrowly particularistic, and deeply primordial reconstruction of the Holocaust trauma, one that continues to exert great influence up to this day." In this narrative, the Jewish fighters who founded Israel and continue to defend it are cast as protagonists.

Arrayed against them is the long list of their historical antagonists: the Germans and their accomplices; the British, who stood between Jewish refugees and the soon-to-be-Israelis; the allied Forces, who intervened too late and failed to save European Jews from the Final solution; Arab-Palestinians and the surrounding nations, who opposed the establishment of the Jewish State; and Europeans, who resented the Jewish survivors and greeted their return to their original residences with several post-war Pogroms. [This] Jewish-Israeli narrative reinforces the militaristic and exclusionary aspects of Zionism. Foreign nations have proved to be

untrustworthy. Israel can rely only on the resources of the Jewish people and its own military strength to defend itself.

Such trauma construction inspired Israelis' reluctance to share "their" land with Palestinians, and it fuelled intense investments in military over diplomatic strategy.

The autonomy of event and referent, however, also allowed the relation between Holocaust and Israel to be reconfigured in a sharply different way. Alexander and Dromi show how much more moderate versions of Zionism gradually emerged. Less exculpatory narratives and their performative enactments challenged the particularistic construction of Jews as primordial victims. Eventually, post-Zionist narratives crystallized assigning Israelis a perpetrator role in a Middle Eastern trauma drama and Palestinians victim status. These more universalizing symbolic constructions were, no doubt, partly responsive to Israeli military reversals and the PLO's mobilizing success. "The new post-1973 context," Alexander and Dromi write, "allowed the tragic construction of the Holocaust trauma to provide a different kind of script, one that could connect Jewish Israelis with Palestinian suffering." But these new trauma narrations were not determined by situational events. Cultural agency and performative enactment took pride of place. Novelists, movie makers, and painters created new fictions that mandated pity and sympathy for the Palestinian plight. After the Sabra and Shatila massacres, Amos Oz, a leading Israeli author of fiction and nonfiction, wrote an open letter to Prime Minister Begin.

Often I, like many Jews, find at the bottom of my soul a dull sense of pain because I did not kill Hitler with my own hands. [But] tens of thousands of dead Arabs will not heat that wound ... Again and again, Mr. Begin, you reveal to the public eye a strange urge to resuscitate Hitler in order to kill him every day anew in the guise of terrorists.

In the years following, revisionist Israeli historians challenged one-sided accounts of the birth of their nation. An Israeli peace movement emerged that put land for peace on the table. As the occupation continued for decades, a new generation of righteous intellectuals and activists indignantly exposed Israeli complicity in Palestinian suffering, sometimes drawing bitter analogies between reactionary Jewish political and military leaders seemingly bent on Palestinian destruction and Nazis responsible for the traumatic destruction of European Jews in the century before.

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We hope this brief introduction substantiates our initial claim that the following contributions amplify propositions about cultural trauma and collective identity we developed in our earlier work.<sup>5</sup> They depart from that earlier foundational theorizing, however, in two ways, one historical, the other civilizational.

*Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* was researched and written in the decade that followed upon the end of the Cold War, a period marked by progressive narratives, widespread hopes for a new world order, and what now appears to be mostly wishful thinking about the dawn of a new day. The intellectual efforts composing the current volume are published in a decidedly less hopeful time. They largely conceptualize and explain a recent history that has been marked by the return of the same kinds of heinous events and social suffering that scarred the century before. As a result, the outcomes of cultural trauma traced in this book have less to do with overcoming schism and civil repair and more to do with how trauma construction so frequently crystallizes polarizing narratives, exacerbates conflict, and leads to even more suffering in turn. Many of the

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<sup>5</sup> These contributions also support the series of subsequent works that have appeared between our initial collaboration in 1998-99 and the present volume. See, e.g., Eyerman 2001, Giesen 2004, Goodman 2008, etc?

chapters that follow explain how cultural traumas can continue without closure. Moncayo's son returned home in 2010 almost three years after Moncayo's march, but thousands like him have not, and many will not, return home, and Colombians increasingly experience this as an affront not only to families but to society. The island of Cyprus remains divided, and Greek Cypriots wish for homelands from which they are ever more temporally, though not emotionally, removed.

The second distinctive difference of the present volume is that its case studies are devoted more to the “East” and the “South” than to the “North” and the “West.” Our earlier work examined slavery in the U.S. and the Holocaust trauma in America and Western Europe, with some discussion of post-Communism as well. Contributors to the present volume look at trauma processes in China and Japan, in Colombia and South Africa, in Cyprus and Greece, in pre-1989 Poland, and in Serbia and Israel. This empirical variation gives us more confidence that cultural trauma theory is not ethnocentric, that it captures the significant processes that mark a class of powerfully affecting, if historically bounded, social facts.

Neither greater empirical variation nor increased theoretical strength, however, produces an increment in normative terms. The moral benefit of cultural trauma is not to be found in the starlight of the scientific firmament, but in ourselves.