

MARTINA KOPF

## **Trauma, Narrative and the Art of Witnessing**

### **1 Introduction**

The problem of how to integrate traumatic experiences into individual as well as collective memories constitutes a challenge to various fields of contemporary research and practice. From psychoanalytical theory the concept of trauma has spread into other domains such as history and cultural theory, where it serves as an interpretive pattern for mental, social, and cultural processes linked with the experience of violence and loss on a collective level.

The transatlantic slave trade and the legal exploitation of slave labour in the Americas may belong to the past in the sense that there are no living persons any more who were directly and personally involved as victims, perpetrators, bystanders or contemporary witnesses. But its memory is still vivid and part of present discourses on racism, colonialism, restitution and globalisation. I suggest here to define the transatlantic slave trade and the violence done to millions of men, women and children of African descent who were hunted, traded and abused as slaves by the European, American, Arab and African stakeholders involved into the slave trade over a period of more than two hundred years as man-made disaster, a concept used in trauma theory both to name events of severe social impact which are collectively experienced as traumatic—like genocides and wars—and to distinguish them from natural catastrophes respectively catastrophes which were not wilfully caused—like earthquakes, tsunamis or accidents. Along with this suggestion I consider the concept of psychological trauma essential in order to read and understand transmissions of the memory of slavery as well as its omissions, be they oral within families and societies, symbolic within rituals, narrative or visual within literature and the arts. The language of the memory of slavery and the range of traumatic experiences inherent to slavery must interact in one way or the other, though their interaction may rather be a competitive and antagonistic

one, as I will show with regard to the relationship between narrative, memory and trauma. Apart from the impact of traumatic memory on present discourses about historical slavery, which may be difficult to locate, I want to point to yet another contemporary dimension of relating the concept of trauma to studies of slavery. Although slavery is *de jure* formally forbidden in all states of the world today, it has never stopped to exist. Forms of forced and unfree labour as well as traffic in human beings, especially women and children, constitute a reality to an estimated range between 27 and 200 millions of people all over the globe today. In the sex industry alone the United Nations Organisation in 2006 estimated the annual net profits from forced labour as high as seven billion US-Dollars.<sup>1</sup> Trying to read and understand narratives and effects of trauma in the representations of historical slavery therefore also means developing epistemological tools to read and understand similar experiences in the present.

In the following I will give an overview of the basic assumptions of psychological and psychoanalytical trauma research and discuss links with the field of cultural studies. I will draw my examples from various forms of traumatic experience and fields of trauma research.

In a second step I will concentrate upon the role of art as a form of empathic witnessing. What I suggest here is a kind of ethical reading or ethical approach to trauma narratives and representations of trauma. The long-term effects of violence differ from those of a natural catastrophe. There are human beings involved, who became victims and perpetrators, others, who looked away, did not interfere or were helpless themselves. Whenever we deal with suffering that human beings on their own have wilfully caused, we are involved in a specific way. Judith Hermann in her classic *Trauma and Recovery* emphasizes the impossibility to keep a neutral stance:

*To study psychological trauma means bearing witness to horrible events.  
When the events are natural disasters or 'acts of God,' those who bear*

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<sup>1</sup> Figures from Brigitte Pilz. "Sklaverei heute: Flexibel, illegal und höchst lukrativ." *Südwind Magazin* Feb. 2007: 35-39 and Martina Kopf. "Der kritische Prostitutionskunde." *Südwind Magazin* Apr. 2006: 3. For a book-length study into modern slavery I want to mention the meanwhile classic Kevin Bales. *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

*witness sympathize readily with the victim. But when the traumatic events are of human design, those who bear witness are caught in the conflict between victim and perpetrator. It is morally impossible to remain neutral in this conflict. The bystander is forced to take sides.*<sup>2</sup>

Empathic witnessing then would mean a kind of reception of and through art that is aware of the mechanisms of trauma and supports the narration of the trauma to come into being—what Ulli Baer relating to a poem by Paul Celan circumscribes as “bearing witness to the witness.”<sup>3</sup> One of the main characteristics of trauma is its resistance to narrative representation. The desire to tell is opposed by the absence of language and meaning the traumatic incident originally provokes. Narrating a trauma therefore constitutes a highly complex process marked by the paradoxical relationship between language, memory, and trauma. In this communicative process active listening and witnessing are of as much importance as the act of narrating itself. This factor is often neglected when it comes to the question of collective trauma work. Yet, as I will argue here, it is also significant for the reception of literature and art that deal with traumatic experience, as well as for acknowledging their specific contribution to the integration and transformation of traumatic memory.

## 2 The trauma concept in psycho-medical history

The idea, that violence and catastrophes hurt the soul in a way, which does not or not easily heal, is maybe as old as human consciousness itself. Every culture and every historical time has possibly developed its own knowledge, language and techniques to deal with suffering caused by violence and hurt. These were long consigned to the realm of religion, spirituality, ritual, myth and art. At the end of the nineteenth century with the secularization of Europe and the establishment of the human sciences the “psyche” was discovered and defined as object of scientific research and medical practice.

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2 Judith Herman. *Trauma and Recovery: The aftermath of violence – from domestic abuse to political terror*. New York: Basic Books, 1997 [1992], 7, [my emphasis].

3 See Ulrich Baer's introduction of “*Niemand zeugt für den Zeugen*”: *Erinnerungskultur und historische Verantwortung nach der Shoah*. Ed. Ulrich Baer. Frankfurt a. M.: suhrkamp, 2000. 7–34.

Today's concept of psychic trauma dates back to the beginnings of psychoanalysis. Historically there have been three larger complexes of social, medical and political interest, which were crucial for the formation of a trauma discourse.

1. Its earliest appearance was the so-called "railway trauma". The first case studies concerned victims of railway accidents, who showed delayed symptoms of shock, repetition or numbness. The railway trauma was then a widely debated phenomenon, which also symbolized the threats and fears connected with the technological and industrial revolution. Since the medical diagnosis was basis for reparation demands, this historical complex also marks the beginning of a new alliance between medicine and jurisdiction, which has remained problematic ever since.<sup>4</sup> In fact it is one of the big issues of the trauma discussion today, as for example with regard to refugee politics or human rights work, when legal demands for reparation or asylum are treated only on the basis of a medically certificated traumatisation.
2. The second crucial complex for the beginning of the study of psychological trauma was hysteria, one of the most "fascinating" diseases at the turn of 19th century. Working with patients suffering from hysteria Pierre Janet in France and Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer in Austria became aware of the relationship between neurosis and traumatic experiences. It was within that context that Freud published his contested Aetiology of Hysteria, saying that the suffering was rooted in sexual abuse during childhood.
3. The third complex was the study of war neuroses during and after the First World War. Like female hysterics, soldiers suffering from combat neuroses were disbelieved and widely considered as malingerers.<sup>5</sup>

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4 The political scientist José Brunner gave an excellent analysis of this problem in his paper "How do Posttraumatic Responses Turn into Chronic Disorders, and Why Is This a Moral Question? On Catalysts, Supplements and Emotional Excess" presented at Trauma—Stigma and Distinction: Social Ambivalences in the Face of Extreme Suffering. Third International Trauma Research Net Conference, St. Moritz, Switzerland, Sept. 14–17, 2006.

5 Herman op. cit. 2, 7–32.

More than half of a century later the movement of US-American veterans of the war against Vietnam succeeded with the official acknowledgement of the medical diagnosis of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. Since 1994 the PTSD-diagnosis is part of the manual of the World Health Organisation of the United Nations. Its main characteristics are divided into three groups:

1. The person concerned has lived through an event or more, which was resp. were utmost threatening for him or her resp. for another person.
2. The person shows so-called intrusive symptoms like reenactment, nightmares, flashbacks, and physical or psychic reactions when confronted with reminders of the traumatisation.
3. The person avoids everything, which could remind her or him of the trauma. These constrictive symptoms include dissociation, amnesia, feelings of alienation and numbness and a loss of emotional capacities.

Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* shows how closely connected trauma research has always been with political movements. She even affirms that medical trauma work can only succeed with the support of and the cooperation with political and human rights movements.

*The study of war trauma becomes legitimate only in a context that challenges the sacrifice of young men in war. The study of trauma in sexual and domestic life becomes legitimate only in a context that challenges the subordination of women and children. Advances in the field occur only when they are supported by a political movement powerful enough to legitimate an alliance between investigators and patients and to counteract the ordinary social processes of silencing and denial. In the absence of strong political movements for human rights, the active process of bearing witness inevitably gives way to the active process of forgetting. Repression, dissociation, and denial are phenomena of social as well as individual consciousness.<sup>6</sup>*

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6 Herman op. cit. 2, 9.

Trauma theory today largely consents upon the fact, that social and legal recognition of the suffering and its causes are as important as medical cure. Frantz Fanon expressed a similar thought as early as in the 1950ies. Postcolonial theory sometimes tends to forget that his work as psychiatrist in colonial Algeria was of great impact for the writing of *The Wretched of the Earth*. In *The Wretched of the Earth* as well as in earlier works Fanon pointed to the problem to “heal” a colonized person adequately from neurosis as long as the colonial situation remains intact.<sup>7</sup>

Psychotraumatology today can be defined as science of the structure, the progress and treatment of injuries of the soul. It focuses upon the effects of exterior events and combines practice and research from psychosocial, psychological and medical disciplines.<sup>8</sup>

The concept of trauma has equally spread into other domains such as history and cultural theory, where it serves as an interpretive pattern for mental, social, and cultural processes linked with the experience of violence and loss on a collective level. This has been particularly the case in postmodernism and the Holocaust debate.<sup>9</sup> One of the basic works in transferring the trauma concept into cultural studies is Cathy Caruths *Unclaimed Experience*.

Yet the trauma concept in cultural analysis is often used in an essentialist and ontological way: either synonymous for the “unsayable” per se, thus ignoring or oversimplifying psychotraumatological research about the more complex relationship between trauma, memory and language. Or as metaphor for a universal human experience, thus denying the specificity of experiencing trauma and cutting the connection to exterior facts and events resp. separating “symptom” from “cause”. The german philologist Harald Weilnböck is one of the most outspoken critics of an undifferentiated use of the concept and shows the almost systematic frequency of definitions which, as in Caruth, declare

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7 Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth*. London et al.: Penguin Books, 1990 [1963], 210f.

8 Gottfried Fischer, Peter Riedesser. *Lehrbuch der Psychotraumatologie*. Second ed. UTB. München: Ernst Reinhardt Verlag, 1999.

9 See Karin Windt. “Das Trauma als Narrativ und kulturelles Deutungsmuster.” *TRN-Newsletter Special Issue 2006: On the concept of trauma in psychology and cultural studies*. Trauma Research Net of the Hamburg Institute for Social Research. 26 May 2009.  
[http://www.traumaresearch.net/fr\\_special2006.htm](http://www.traumaresearch.net/fr_special2006.htm).

history per se as traumatic, maintain trauma as the very paradigm for memory or as origin of history.<sup>10</sup>

### 3 Witnessing trauma

I will now argue the potential of art as form of empathic witnessing. My focus is upon literature, which is my field of research, but possibly some aspects hold true for visual arts as well. We often think of art as “healing”, in the sense that it restores meaning where it had been destroyed, integrates suppressed and painful experience into collective memory and gives victims of violence voice, agency and dignity. But even if the attributed healing potential is almost common sense in the perception of art, we hardly know anything sure about how this healing works, for whom it works and about its results.

In my research about relations between literature and trauma I started out with a question that arose from my personal experience as a reader.<sup>11</sup> The first time I asked myself this question consciously was when reading *Algerian White* by the Algerian writer Assia Djébar. Djébar had written the text under the impression of the murder of friends, colleagues and family members by radical islamists during the Algerian civil war of the 1990s, driven by the urgency of immediate remembrance.<sup>12</sup> My question was simply “How can it be that I like this book?” How can I be touched and attracted by a piece of writing that brings the violence and suffering of those concerned so painfully to mind, rendering them more “real” in my eyes than did the reports in the media before? What exactly makes for its attraction?

Now the experience of deriving some sort of strength from reading literature that puts into words the dimension of pain, suffering and violence we usually treat as “unspeakable” was not new to me. But what exactly motivates us to confront ourselves as readers resp. spectators voluntarily with “a suffering

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10 Harald Weilnböck. “Das Trauma muss dem Gedächtnis unverfügbar bleiben.’ Trauma-Ontologie und anderer Miss-/Brauch von Traumakzepten in geisteswissenschaftlichen Diskursen.” *Mittelweg* 36, Zeitschrift des Hamburger Instituts für Sozialforschung 16.2 (2007): 2–64.

11 The following reflections are discussed extensively in my book *Trauma und Literatur: Das Nicht-Erzählbare erzählen—Assia Djébar und Yvonne Vera*. Frankfurt a. M.: Brandes und Apsel, 2005.

12 Assia Djébar. *Ces Voix qui m’assiègent ... en marge de ma francophonie*. Paris: Albin Michel and Montréal: Les presses de l’université de Montréal, 1999, 247.

that is known to have been actual rather than imaginary”<sup>13</sup>? What do we gain from this confrontation, what is our interest in it?

Getting back to my reading of Assia Djebar taking a closer look on my reading experience, I saw a tremendous contradiction opening up between the language and the content of the narration. It seems that apart from what is being told there is still transmitted something else in the act of reading, which not only differs from the content of the narration, but constitutes a kind of second reality. But if we try to name it, do we then deny the original traumatic experience at the heart of the text?

#### 4 Narrative, Memory, Trauma

These questions lead us to the relationship between narrative, memory and trauma, a relationship marked by paradoxes, tensions and contradictions. One of the main characteristics of trauma is its resistance to narrative representation.

Speaking about trauma we find ourselves in the paradoxical situation of speaking about experience, which already means a violent assault to the signifying power of language. In his essay “Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory and Trauma,”<sup>14</sup> Eric van Alphen shows that already the term ‘traumatic experience’ proves inadequate. Experience is a discursive process and demands subjectivity. Traumatizing violence however cannot be ‘experienced’ and therefore cannot be integrated into narrative memory, as it puts the self and its usual functions out of order. “Trauma is fundamentally (and not gradually) different from memory because ‘it becomes dissociated from conscious awareness and voluntary control.’”<sup>15</sup> According to Werner Bohleber’s depiction of the history of psychoanalytical trauma theory we can filter two basic factors from the numerous definitions of trauma present in psychoanalytical thinking today:

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13 Geoffrey Hartman. “Shoah and Intellectual Witness.” *Partisan Review* 65 (1998): 37–48, 39–40.  
14 Eric van Alphen. “Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory, and Trauma.” *Acts of Memory*. Ed. Mieke Bal et al. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1999. 24–38.  
15 van Alphen, op. cit. 14, 36.



1. Traumatic experience always constitutes 'too much' for the self to contain.<sup>16</sup>
2. It mutes the interior 'other,' the interior good object that mediates between the self and the outside world making confidence and communication possible.<sup>17</sup> This overwhelming 'too much' and the loss of the empathic interior 'other' destroy the ability to narrate the trauma.

In order to understand narratives of traumatic experiences we must recognize and understand the absence of language and meaning such an experience originally provokes. An absence that signifies a violent interruption of the flow of communication, a destruction of one's basic confidence in the common grounds of a symbolic order that is at the forefront of any kind of communication.

At the same time, traumatic memory urges its own narration. Judith Herman defines this as the dialectics of trauma, the conflict between the desire to tell and the will to deny:

*The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma. People who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility and thereby serves the twin imperatives of truth-telling and secrecy. When the truth is finally recognized, survivors can begin their recovery. But far too often secrecy prevails, and the story of the traumatic event surfaces not as a verbal narrative but as a symptom.*<sup>18</sup>

Narrating a trauma constitutes a highly complex process, which needs to be taken into account when we deal with trauma narratives or representations of trauma.

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16 Werner Bohleber. "Die Entwicklung der Traumatheorie in der Psychoanalyse." *Psyche* 54 (2000): 797–839, 798.

17 Bohleber, op. cit 16, 821–823.

18 Herman, op. cit. 2, 1.

First it is important to distinguish between the event and its impact. “Trauma” in everyday’s language is often used synonymous with the traumatic event. “Being traumatized” then equals having lived through terrible events one is not able to talk about and has to suppress in one’s memory. But in fact survivors of massive violence often are ready to talk and remember perfectly well what happened.

Let me give one example: Esther Mujawayo, a survivor of the genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda, tells in her testimony the story of a friend of hers. A survivor like her, she suffered a lot from never being allowed to tell her story to the end. Whenever she told others how she survived the massacres and had to watch the brutal murder of her relatives, they would interrupt her at a certain point saying something like “no, stop it, I can’t bear this”. For her it was a relief when she first encountered another person who would allow her to tell her story to the end. So, it was not her who was not able to tell, but the others who were not able to listen, to assist her narration, which blocked it. In fact from Holocaust survivors for example we know that the desire to tell, to testify to what happened often constitutes a powerful force of survival. So in fact we have to speak also of “unlistenable” experience, and not only of “unspeakable” experience.

In an interesting analysis of Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* Anne B. Dalton shows how the author integrates the possibly dismissive attitude of her white female readership against an explicit narration of the sexual abuse she suffered as a slave into her narrative strategies. Similar to other literary representations of sexual violence, Jacobs tells about it by performing the impossibility to tell, as it shows itself in allusions, metaphors and ellipses. Yet as Dalton demonstrates the narration thus does not only reveal the traumatic dimension of the experience, but also the pressure on the survivor to find a language for her testimony which should not only meet the experience, but also find acceptance in her audience. It reveals “an obverse relation between Jacobs and her audience, one in which the *more* Jacobs tries to tell, the less she may be heard by those she feels she must persuade.”<sup>19</sup>

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19 Anne B. Dalton. “The Devil and the Virgin: Writing Sexual Abuse in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*” *Violence, Silence, and Anger: Women’s Writing as Transgression*. Ed. Deirdre Lashgari. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995. 38–61. 39.

So we have to make two important distinctions: One between the difficulty to tell and the difficulty to listen. And one between speaking of the traumatic event and speaking of trauma. As for the production and reception of trauma narratives and trauma representations in art, the resulting question is: How can we not only tell about, represent and perform traumatic memory, but also how can we render trauma narratives listenable?

Dori Laub in his psychoanalytical theory of trauma puts a strong emphasis on the importance of listening in the communicative process, which brings traumatic memory into language. Trauma, according to Laub, must not be understood as a hidden or lost memory, which only waits for being delivered. Neither is it a past event or experience. On the contrary:

*Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect.<sup>20</sup>*

As Laub says, it is only in the process of narration or bearing witness that the story of the trauma comes into being. This process cannot be done alone, and Judith Herman alike stresses the fact that “no one can face trauma alone”<sup>21</sup> It needs an “addressable other” who, on her or his turn, testifies to an original absence, the unknown and unintegrated aspects of traumatic experience:

*The victim's narrative—the very process of bearing witness to massive trauma—does indeed begin with someone who testifies to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence, in spite of the overwhelming and compelling nature of the reality of its occurrence.<sup>22</sup>*

As shown in the examples before, if there is no addressable other, traumatic memory cannot be translated into narrative memory.

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20 Dori Laub. “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening.” *Testimony*. Ed. Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub. London: Routledge, 1992. 57–74. 69.

21 Herman, op. cit. 2, 153.

22 Laub, op. cit. 20, 57.

*The absence of an empathic listener, or more radically, the absence of an addressable other, an other who can hear the anguish of one's memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story.*<sup>23</sup>

## 5 Listening to trauma narratives in art and literature

Irene Kacandes explores the importance of reading as part of the transmission of traumatic memory through literature in her essay "Narrative Witnessing as Memory Work". She compares the dynamics, which evolve between writer, reader and the text with the dynamics explored by Laub in the process of reconstruction of traumatic memory and testifying to traumatic events. As Kacandes shows, a reading, which is aware of the dynamics of traumatic memory has to take several levels of witnessing into consideration. She compares these to the levels Laub defines in his article "An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival" with regard to witnessing in relation to the Holocaust experience:

*(T)he level of witness to oneself within the experience; the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others; and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself.*<sup>24</sup>

Kacandes' transmission of this model to literary theory reads as follows:

*In accounting for a literary text, one needs to investigate components of witnessing at the level of the story (that is, the events that make up the plot), at the level of the text (that is, the specific forms the telling of those events takes), and at the level of the production and reception of the text. [...] That is to say, literary texts can be about trauma, in the sense that they can depict perpetrations of violence against characters who are traumatized by the violence and then successfully or unsuccessfully*

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23 Laub, op. cit. 20, 68.

24 Dori Laub. "An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival." Felman, Laub, op. cit. 20, 75-92. 75.

witness their trauma. But texts can also 'perfor' trauma, in the sense that they can 'fail' to tell the story, by eliding, repeating, and fragmenting components of the story.<sup>25</sup>

The importance of Kacandes' connection of trauma theory and literary theory lies in the fact that she not only points to the performative, mimetical level of the literary text; she also demonstrates the necessity of a reading which recognizes the performance of trauma in the text as well as the moments where it "fails to tell", in order to let transmission flow.<sup>26</sup>

Writing and reading are two poles, and all listening, witnessing, experiencing and remembering constantly move between one and the other. Good writers are maybe above all good listeners. That is to say, their skill consists to a large extent in the ability to be simultaneously sensitive to themselves, to the narratives of their time and to what these narratives evoke in themselves and in others. Furthermore, they are—or should be—able to hear what the narratives and the people of their time and their social surroundings conceal. Actually, their art to a large extent crystallizes in their ability to transform what they perceive in themselves, in others and in the narratives of their time into a linguistic form that meets this perception. The same holds true to a certain degree for the reader. Reading—like writing—is a cultural practice that can be exerted with more or less quality. Literature as trauma witness does not only demand attentive writing but attentive reading as well. Active listening and a reading aware of the structure of trauma and of the effects of violence form part of the narrative transmission and transformation of traumatic memory.<sup>27</sup> This necessary awareness cannot be developed within literature or cultural studies alone, but has to refer to other clusters of knowledge such as psychotraumatology or sociological theories of violence.

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25 Irene Kacandes. "Narrative Witnessing as Memory Work: Reading Gertrud Kolmar's *A Jewish Mother*." Bal op. cit. 14. 55–71. 56.

26 For an application of Kacandes' model see Martina Kopf. "Writing Sexual Violence: Words and Silences in Yvonne Vera's *Under the Tongue*." *Body, Sexuality, and Gender: Versions and Subversions in African Literatures 1*. Ed. Flora Veit-Wild, Dirk Naguschewski. Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2005. 243–253.

27 For a more detailed analysis of the communicative process necessary to transform traumatic memory into narrative memory through literature see Kopf *Trauma und Literatur*, chapter "Zeuginnen der Geschichte", 53–67.

When I look at my discipline—African literature—I am struck by the fact how little critical discourse knows and says about violence. I would even say that many novels know and tell much more about it than most of the critics perceive.

To give one example let me point to the critical reception of the Zimbabwean writer Yvonne Vera. While her novels represent skilful pieces of the “art of witnessing” psychic trauma in post-war and post-apartheid social contexts, trauma has hardly been taken up as subject in literature studies concerned with her work—as if it is not recognized. Or it gets perceived of in an idealizing way. Thus the novels *Without a Name* and *Under the Tongue*, both telling about the aftereffects of sexual violence from an interior perspective, in a feminist reading get often uncritically interpreted as “recovery stories”. Yet there are no signs that the protagonists do recover from the traumatizing violence they survived. Rather they perform the impossibility to recover, to create a coherent narrative of the trauma, since there is no addressable other within the narration. If the novels represent healing narratives nevertheless, they do so not within the narration, but on the narrative level, by the narrative techniques Vera applies to unfold complex processes of witnessing, listening, and remembering in which our reading actively participates. Or as the writer herself puts it:

*I want you to be there, I don't want you to hear about it, I want you to be a witness, which means taking part in what is happening each moment, as it happens. But I want to do it without crudity, with a certain elegance, so you feel you can still endure it and see beauty in it. And this beauty can only be in the language, I don't see where else it can lie. That's where language becomes important.*<sup>28</sup>

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28 Vera in Jane Bryce. “Interview with Yvonne Vera.” *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera*. Ed. Muponde, Robert; Taruvinga, Mandi. Harare et al.: Weaver Press et al. 2002, 217–226. 222–223.

## 6 Conclusion

With regard to psychosocial trauma research I want to keep in mind two crucial points:

1. In order to make the traumatic impact of the experience loose its weight, some sort of translation of traumatic memory into narrative memory has to take place. The production of a healing or integrating narrative demands that a certain circuit of communication comes into being. This process is open ended, it must not be misunderstood as simple reconstruction of past events. "Healing" in this context cannot mean a restoration or return to a stage "before" the event, "before" the traumatization. It is a transformative process, which is directed to what Dori Laub calls "the recreation of a livable consciousness".
2. Individual trauma work will remain ineffective to a certain point if it is not accompanied by social recognition. Just like Frantz Fanon pointed out that it is impossible to "heal" individual neurosis within the colonizing context, traumatized refugees for example cannot be successfully treated while their status is not legally acknowledged as well. The same holds true for enslaved or formerly enslaved persons in a context where the enslavement of others is socially accepted, for victims of child abuse in a social or cultural order which does not acknowledge sexual violence and power abuse as a crime, or for survivors of ethnic or political violence in a post-conflict situation where perpetrators are not held responsible.

In literature and art the translation of traumatic memory into narrative memory as well as the production of trauma narratives is transferred to a collective level. Imagination and aesthetics then are used as means to bridge the gap between the "real", the individual experience of it, and its narrative representations.

Any kind of artistic language, when striving for the exploration and representation of traumatic experience, shifts the focus from the identification with reality to the way of *how* to tell it, to the very forms and means of transmission. The quest for language and form as well as the aesthetic distance it creates can

be considered as re-creative and re-humanizing in the face of dehumanizing violence and destruction.<sup>29</sup> Fictionalizing, artistic and creative responses are necessary to counter the enclosure and numbing of traumatic contents and their exclusion from collective memory.

By their access to public discourse and collective imaginary, literature and art contribute to the social recognition of personal suffering and traumatic reality. A successful transmission and transformation of traumatic memory however requests that the trauma narrative within be received and acknowledged by a reading aware of the structure and symptomatic of trauma as well as of the paradoxical relationship between trauma, narrative and memory.

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29 See also Hartman, op. cit. 2.



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