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Trauma Unheard: The Social Disenfranchisement of Grief

by

Mel Anderson

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To the Graduate Faculty:

The members of the committee appointed to examine the thesis of MEL ANDERSON find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

Alan Johnson,
Major Advisor

Amanda Zink,
Committee Member

Gesine Hearn,
Graduate Faculty Representative

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Thesis Abstract—Idaho State University 2022

Critical trauma theory in literature posits that trauma is both unremembered and unspoken, in line with Freudian hypotheses. This thesis counters, instead arguing that trauma is both remembered and spoken by the survivor, but is not socially permitted to be spoken, which silences survivors. The discrepancy between the Freudian idea of trauma and the experience of trauma is illustrated by conducting a comparative analysis of the Freudian-influenced *Light in August* to the Traumatic Realist *Survival in Auschwitz*. This examination reveals that even the deepest traumas are both remembered and spoken, though rarely granted the social permission to be heard. Instead, silencing trauma to avoid listener discomfort overwhelmingly silences the experience of the already marginalized.

Keywords: Critical trauma theory, traumatic realism, trauma

Chapter I

I. Introduction and Methodology

Critical Trauma Theory (CTT) in literature posits that, for survivors of trauma, trauma impairs memory, agency and voice. This thesis counters that trauma is both remembered and spoken, but is socially unheard. Citing heavily from narratives of genocide and political violence which illustrate that trauma is impossible to forget, I argue that the brain remembers trauma, but that trauma is socially unspeakable. Moreover, when we say trauma itself is unspeakable, we excuse ourselves from the imperative to listen. The burden is shifted: It is not our burden to understand, but a survivor's burden to ensure others' comfort, to allow others to deny the existence, or at least the close temporal proximity, of pain. The discrepancy between the social idea of trauma and the actual experience of trauma can be best illustrated by comparing trauma in fiction, specifically *Light in August* by William Faulkner, in which survivors are depicted without memory, voice, and agency to trauma in nonfiction, specifically *Survival in Auschwitz* by Primo Levi, in which survivors have not only enhanced memory, but the voice to write and publicly share trauma and the agency to choose their own survival mechanisms. My examination of Holocaust narratives, with a comparative examination of trauma in fiction, will demonstrate that even the deepest traumas are both remembered and spoken, though rarely granted the social permission to be heard. The voices that bring discomfort are silenced. While CTT is not wrong, it is misapplied, and therefore misses an essential understanding of trauma as understood socially which would explain why trauma is portrayed in literature in a way that often robs fictional survivors of memory, voice, and agency. Unfortunately, teaching that trauma survivors can't remember or speak overwhelmingly silences the experience of the already marginalized.

The framework of current day CTT in literature was unwittingly laid by Sigmund Freud. Freud, grappling with the mass of soldiers returning home from World War II with startling trauma symptoms which included flashbacks, night terrors and intense anxiety, posited that, contrary to his earlier hypothesis, not all human activity is ruled by “the pleasure principle” (Freud 56). The pleasure principle, a defining characteristic of Freudian analysis, argues that human dreams, emotions and moral choices are regulated by the “avoidance of unpleasure or a production of pleasure” (Freud 1). Intrusive trauma memories and war related night terrors associated with “the dark and dismal subject of traumatic neurosis” (Freud 8) didn’t fit that hypothesis as, under that theory, the brain would not pull up traumatic memories either in dream or in conscious memory because it does not cause pleasure. Thus, neither flashback nor night terror fit in with the theoretical pleasure principle. In response, Freud revised his theory and instead argued that there is a “tendency toward” pleasure, but not the absolute compulsion he had once theorized (Freud 3). Instead, nightmares of traumatic experience, memories of which, he argues, did not bother conscious survivors, revealed the sleeping torment of survivorship through the “mysterious masochistic trends of the ego” (Freud 8). Freud theorized that trauma leaves survivors with only “repressed” or subconscious memory, and, because the memory is repressed and unavailable to the conscious mind, the traumatized individual is not only unable to remember their trauma, the individual is also unable to speak of the trauma experience (Freud 13).

In 1996, English PhD and researcher Cathy Caruth, following Freudian theory, published *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, spearheading the creation of CTT as a new lens through which to analyze literature and, specifically, the portrayal of trauma in fiction. Making “no claim to clinical expertise in the area of trauma” (Caruth, *Listening to Trauma* ix)

but applying Freudian psychoanalysis to literature, Caruth argued that trauma is unspeakable, overriding the ability of the brain to comprehend or language to describe. Among Caruth's foundational beliefs is the idea of traumatic amnesia, that, in trauma "the videographer" of the brain simply leaves with the "tape still running" (Manda 5). The departure of the videographer leaves the trauma-affected individual with no memory, or only hazy memories, of the event, as trauma "is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness" (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 4). Thus, traumatic amnesia is not just an inability to encode or narrate an experience, but instead, according to Bessel Van der Kolk who Caruth heavily cites, trauma "can evolve into a complete amnesia of the experience" (Van der Kolk 285).

In line with Freud, Caruth argued that memory and voice are unavailable after trauma, leaving the individual in trauma without the ability to claim the trauma and incorporate it into the conscious, lived experience or to "master what was never fully grasped in the first place" (Caruth, *Ashes of History* 6). Further, Caruth claimed that "the shape of individual lives, the history of the traumatized individual, is nothing other than the determined repetition of the event of destruction" (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 65). Thus, more than living without memory and voice, CTT also posits that survivors lack moral agency to determine their own futures because "the experience of trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his or her very will" (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 2). Thus, according to Caruth and Freud, trauma robs survivors of memory, agency and voice.

While the bulk of Caruth's arguments center around the psychology of trauma, her arguments that focus on literature specifically are much stronger. For instance, Caruth argues that in order to access and heal traumatic memories, trauma needs to be expressed in an abstract

way that literature and writing provides. While Caruth's understanding of trauma is too narrowly defined for the individual and unhelpfully puts particular emphasis on Freudian ideas that hold little weight, there is merit in arguing not only for the space for survivors to narrate their experiences, but also in creating that space in the written word, which can free survivors from constraints of social shame.

Caruth based much of her research on the idea of "recovered memories" of trauma, a "part of the folklore of psychiatry and clinical psychology" (Freyd 295) in which a person with no conscious memory of trauma could nonetheless have and access those "memories." This theory, again Freudian in nature, is also "widely criticized by scholars," specifically scholars of psychology (Ulatowska 610). If scholars of psychology widely criticize a theory, it should lessen the credibility of those discredited theories, especially when applied in other fields. Said differently, "as our understanding of psychological trauma changes and expands, our literary theories of trauma must evolve too" (Pederson, "Narrative" 109). The idea of repressed and recovered memories stemming from Freudian psychoanalysis was an idea so cancerous it led to the mass incarceration of innocent people in the child molestation witch hunts of the 1980's. Later called the "Satanic Panic," young children who had exhibited sexual behaviors which alarmed their parents and caregivers were thought to have repressed memories of abuse and were subjected to hypnotism to recover the memories of molestation that must undoubtedly have existed hidden in the minds of the children (Coons 1377). The memories, which were later found to be false memories, sent countless day care workers, parents, and grandparents to prison for abuse that had never happened. The children's flawed testimony was permitted in court after the children were hypnotized and "recovered" memories lost to the haze of "traumatic amnesia" (Nathan 80). However, even years after these theories had been thoroughly debunked in

psychology, so that recovered memories and memories accessed through hypnotism are no longer allowed to be presented as evidence in criminal trials in twenty-eight states, the other twenty-two states putting significant restrictions on its use (Ramchandani, “False Witness”), the idea of traumatic amnesia lived on in the trauma studies being applied to literature. This is despite the fact that “there is substantial evidence that what is often a problem for victims of traumatic experiences is not the lack of memory of those events, but the inability to forget them” (Ulatowska 611). Indeed, “genuinely traumatic events—those experienced at the time as overwhelmingly terrifying and life-threatening—are seldom, if ever, truly forgotten” (Freyd 295). Regardless, following CTT’s mode of analysis, literary critics view the portrayal of trauma in literature as accurate depictions of the nature of trauma and its processes, in which trauma is neither remembered nor spoken. Trauma scholar Barry Stampfl argues that it is “our own modern/postmodern era” in which “the trop of the unspeakable [trauma] has attained particular prominence (15).

Rebuking both Freud and Caruth, in 2003, Richard J. McNally, a Harvard professor of psychology, offered a new approach in his book *Remembering Trauma*, in which he specifically argues that memory does not “operate like a video recorder” (77). This is in reference to the two modern psychologists, Bessel Van der Kolk and Judith Herman on whom Caruth “ties her literary theory” (Pederson 335). For Caruth, in trauma “the videographer left, but the tape kept running” (qtd. in Manda 5). McNally argues that the foundations of CTT are threatened by the fact that “[t]raumatic amnesia theorists often misunderstand the studies they cite in support of their position” (McNally 190). McNally pointed that for children who undergo surgery, “the more stressed the child was at the time, the more details about the hospital procedure he remembered five years later” (McNally, *Remembering* 61). McNally delineates the difference

between memory of the actual trauma and memory of unimportant facts surrounding the trauma, specifically, that people experiencing trauma, such as being assaulted, would remember in horrific detail the details of the actual assault, but not smaller surface facts, like the number on a football jersey because “traumatic events themselves are easily remembered, but sometimes they capture attention so well that subjects fail to encode related neutral information” (*Remembering* 51). His research showed that “the central details of the emotional events are better retained than those of neutral events” (*Remembering* 52). McNally proffered evidence from his actual clinical practice of psychology and numerous studies of trauma to show that traumatic amnesia is a myth and ought not to be the foundation of a literary theory. Dismantling Caruth’s arguments that the brain after trauma can neither remember nor narrate that trauma, McNally argued that far from being “unremembered” or “unknowable” trauma is remembered, knowable, and able to be communicated, because “stress does not impair memory; it strengthens it” (*Remembering* 62). The activation of the amygdala, the hippocampus and the release of cortisol in the fight or flight processes of the brain enhances memory of traumatic events, leaving survivors with detailed, sensory enriched memories of trauma. The brain does not lose access to the trauma memory and the brain does not cause trauma to be unspeakable. While McNally acknowledges that “[t]herapists writing in the early 1980’s observed that adult incest survivors were often reluctant to disclose their abuse to others” (*Remembering* 5), he challenges the conclusion, stating that “one cannot assume that failure to disclose means inability to remember” (*Folklore* 30).

Further, and contrary to Caruth’s argument, trauma is not a passive experience, but instead, individuals retain active agency. Citing Holocaust survivors “readily provid[ing] detailed narrative accounts of their horrific experiences” (*Remembering* 63) McNally argued that, not

only can trauma be expressed, it needs to be given language in order to facilitate healing in trauma survivors.

Twelve years after McNally published *Remembering Trauma*, English professor Josh Pederson of Boston University wrote “Speak, Trauma: Toward a Revised Understanding of Literary Trauma Theory,” in which he argues for the broad acceptance of McNally’s approach as supported by both literature and science, and further dismantles Caruth’s arguments, stating that the future of trauma studies lies not with Caruth, but with McNally. From his opening sentence “Do we forget the traumas we suffer, losing them in an amnesic haze, or do our moments of deepest pain remain available to us?” (Pederson “Speak” 332) Pederson argues that the latter, not the long-accepted former, is true. Strongly siding with McNally, Pederson writes “For McNally, unlike for Caruth, trauma is memorable and describable, and his book raises serious questions about the clinical foundation on which [Caruth] builds her literary edifice while requiring contemporary critics to re-evaluate her model” (“Speak” 334). Among Pederson’s arguments that strongly repudiate Caruth is the idea, supported by McNally, that “narrative is neither disrupted by trauma nor forced to circumnavigate it” (“Narrative” 107). Pederson’s article is significant as it would change the direction of trauma studies from its foundational understanding. Calling that understanding flawed, Pederson argues that Caruth’s approach belies actual trauma research, research that has been mounting as more and more traumas are scaffolded through social healing programs. He further argues that Caruth’s trauma theories lead to a fatal misunderstanding of trauma as it is represented in literature. Pederson attempts to tear down the foundation of trauma studies and build it up again using deeper understanding of trauma’s operations within the brain of the survivor stating that “the first wave of literary trauma theorists” were “plagued by

conceptual and empirical problems” (Pederson 337). Since those first trauma theorists, psychological understanding has significantly evolved.

There are problems with CTT as it stands. For instance, it attempts to understand trauma in literature in a way that is seen in no other mode of literary analysis. In other critical analyses of literature, such as feminist (especially Lacanian) or critical race studies, the analysis is completed by reviewing the writing and, from that, describing what the writing says about how certain identities, institutions and social problems are viewed culturally and socially. We excavate to discover what the words reveal about the culture, society and time period in which they were created, as a reflection of belief and attitude, not absolute fact. For instance, when we read descriptions of race in pre-abolitionist literature, we do not accept depictions of race as accurate depictions or fair assessments. Instead, we read descriptions of race, extrapolating from the text the underlying and varying prejudices or social views of the time period. The analysis of CTT is currently backward. Instead of critically examining trauma in literature to analyze the social ideas that underpin how trauma is understood culturally, CTT instead postulates that literary sources that represent trauma as causing lapses in memory, agency and voice are at least somewhat accurate and then analyzes those depictions for truth. Trauma as a literary theory and field could blossom to make room for potentially accurate research if it presented two parallel tracks—the one studying representations of the brain in trauma, in line with McNally, and the other studying a society’s response to and cultural understanding of trauma. The societal avoidance of trauma, and the reflection of that avoidance in literature, led Arthur Miller to make the following observation:

My argument with so much of psychoanalysis, is the preconception that suffering is a mistake, or a sign of weakness, or a sign even of illness, when in fact, possibly the greatest truths

we know have come out of people's suffering; that the problem is not to undo suffering or to wipe it off the face of the earth but to make it inform our lives, instead of trying to cure ourselves of it constantly and avoid it, and avoid anything but that lobotomized sense of what they call 'happiness' (Ouweneel 73).

This astute observation criticizes the social implication that trauma survival, and the healing needed afterward, are evidence of weakness or frailty. Understanding the brain's remembrance on the one hand and also trauma's collective cultural forgetting on the other would allow trauma to be analyzed from multiple perspectives, instead of one myopic view.

As with other fields, examining a problem from one viewpoint often misses essential truth. T.S. Eliot perhaps described this best in a 1914 graduate seminar. Specifically commenting on the myopias of assuming one viewpoint, Eliot argued that "it cannot be wholly true that any explanation is wholly wrong" because the world is relative and facts depend on perspective (Perl, *Advantage of Tradition* 121). He further stated that "while every theory is an illusion, every theory is also true." According to Eliot, a point of view becomes more accurate as it takes into account multiple points of view. In his Harvard papers, he theorizes that "the best describers walk around the object they describe and they ask other people what they see from where they are standing and include that in their descriptions" because "the maintenance of a single perspective in viewing any object, however minuscule the object, is not possible in a world that is constantly in flux" (Perl, "Literary Modernism"). One angle of view, true for even the minuscule, and especially true for the complex, does not allow a substantial enough understanding of a subject. What holds true for the individual brain does not hold equally true for culture and society, and vice versa, so choosing one viewpoint only to apply to all situations is not only unhelpful, it also misses essential truth. When we demand one viewpoint to describe or

theorize, we miss, in Eliot's estimation, truth. Greater truth can be found, even in CTT, when multiple viewpoints are taken into consideration.

False dichotomies lead to a lesser degree of understanding. One does not have to choose either Caruth or McNally. There is truth in each viewpoint and an understanding of each viewpoint is necessary to drawing a conclusion about the entire beast that is human trauma. Not all of Caruth's claims are shortsighted or erroneous. In fact, when applied, not to the brain, but to society, we can see a social unremembering. Traditional trauma study zooms the camera on the brain and on the self to understand the wide silence of trauma survivors, ignoring cultural acceptance, or non-acceptance, of trauma—ignoring the collective's power to silence individual survivors. However, what may be true for the individual may not be true for the many, the society. A theory could fit one and not the other, making it, not incorrect, but out of place. This thesis will argue that CTT, as it is currently conceptualized, misses essential truth through a myopic focus on Freudian psychoanalysis. It is not wrong but misapplied, and therefore misses an essential understanding of trauma and why trauma is portrayed in literature in a way that often robs fictional survivors of memory, voice, and agency, all while trauma survivors express the opposite experience.

I postulate that McNally and Caruth are both correct in that both describe parts of the enigma, in this case trauma, but both also fail to describe the entire picture. I say enigma, not because trauma isn't universal—it is—but because it is often so difficult to grasp, especially from an outside perspective. Trying to understand not only the brain in trauma but also a social and cultural understanding of trauma from a single viewpoint is shortsighted. Although Caruth purports to describe the brain in trauma, her theories are more effective when applied not to the brain, but to society as, in America, society's reaction to trauma is all too often to unsee and

unremember. Our views of trauma are conditioned by specific cultures and places. Because of that, there is an “inadequacy of Eurocentric trauma theory to account for diverse experiences across cultures” (Milatovia 246). If Caruth’s arguments, instead of being applied to the brain, were applied to society, she would also be correct. Richard McNally is correct that the brain in trauma holds on to those trauma memories for survival. McNally, describing that the brain remembers in sometimes horrific detail the traumas we experience is true for the brain, but seldom for society, as the brain remembers, but society forgets, or refuses to see. When we pit Caruth against McNally, we create a false dichotomy and reject the bit of truth that each viewpoint describes. Moreover, in rejecting Caruth, we reject her seminal work. That work could be preserved if applied to society’s reaction to trauma and not the brain. Caruth and McNally both say something essential about trauma, how trauma is portrayed in literature, and more importantly, our ability to remember and learn from personal and collective trauma. Caruth and McNally are both accurate when applied to different aspects of trauma and should form parallel tracks in trauma studies, the one describing the brain of the trauma-affected individual as the brain processes trauma, and the other describing how society reacts and responds to trauma-affected individuals and their socially taboo narratives.

While Caruth’s unremembering argument rings untrue when used to understand the brain, it is credible and poignant when it is used to explain societal and cultural norms in the treatment of trauma-affected individuals and the non-hearing of trauma narrative. Non trauma-affected individuals many times do not know what to say, not necessarily in an overt way that intends to exclude, but in a socially enforced silence that is nonetheless isolating. Truly, it is non-trauma-affected individuals, the bystanders, who lose their words, who find trauma unspeakable, or, more aptly, unhearable. Just as trauma is remembered in the brain, it is unremembered in society.

Applied to literature properly, Caruth describes the social isolation many survivors of trauma describe in the wake of their survival; their traumas are truly unspeakable—not in the context of expressive language, but in the context of *receptive* language. Survivors of the most heinous traumas have shown, time and again, that they can speak, but are without listeners. They describe being without the social permission that would allow them to speak their traumas outside of the therapy circle. They describe being without the social context that would allow them to claim their experiences. They are not silent. They are silenced. Their stories remind others that deep pain exists in the world—and in close temporal proximity.

Understanding how we view trauma as a society, and then working to expand or change that view of trauma, has the potential for far reaching impact. The way a society views trauma is evident in how they write about trauma. Although many times fictional survivors of trauma are written in a way that emphasizes their silence or their inability to speak their traumas, that does not necessarily mean that survivors are silent, but that the society in which the work was produced prefers or expects silence of survivors. Further, when a large amount of writers in a given culture depict trauma survivors as silent or unable to speak their traumas, it reinforces the social framework that expects trauma to remain unspoken. A reticence to hear trauma is apparent in the silence imposed on child abuse survivors, sexual assault admissions, and narratives exposing the continued traumas of racism, sexism and homophobia. Further, racial, ethnic, sexual and gender minorities are much more likely to experience trauma in their lifetimes (McLaughlin 2225; Roberts 2439), trauma that Eurocentric concepts do not adequately address. Thus, the notion of silent survivors only serves those in positions of power while silencing the lived experienced of the marginalized. By refusing to hear trauma, the stories of ongoing trauma

in the lives of the already marginalized are ignored, further removing voice from vulnerable populations.

The primary works for critical analysis are William Faulkner's *Light in August* and Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*. *Light in August*, written in the same general time period as *Survival in Auschwitz*, is a fictional account of trauma that was heavily influenced by Freudian psychoanalytic theory. The novel follows Joe Christmas, who, after violent childhood abuse, not only loses his memory of the traumatic events and his ability to speak his experience, but also loses his moral agency as he metes out to others the same violence that he endured, thus illustrating the inescapability of becoming one's abuser. Because of the particular Freudian influence, Joe Christmas' experiences as a character are in line with Caruth's hypotheses. On the other hand, Levi's book is not fiction, but a particular type of nonfiction called both traumatic realism and testimonio. Levi wrote *Survival in Auschwitz* after the end of World War II and it recounts not only his survival, but also the political systems that allowed the death camps to exist. While the whole of trauma survival and depiction cannot be extrapolated from a single text, Levi shows that not only can he remember and speak his years long and severe traumas, he also has the moral agency to choose not to become his tormenters.

While both genres are perfectly situated to explore aspects of trauma experience and survival, the differences between the two are astounding. The one, a traumatic realist testimonio, recounts an actual experience of trauma, in which the survivors are capable of retaining voice, memory and agency. The other, which still has access to the range of human experiences, sets itself within a more culturally nuanced understanding of trauma which was specifically influenced by Freud, "demonstrating the ways that the experience and remembrance of trauma are situated in relation to a specific culture and place" (Balaev 155). Thus, an understanding of

trauma in fiction is tied to the cultural views of a specific space in a specific time period such that “[f]ictional representations...facilitate cultural understanding of the meaning of trauma” (Goldsmith 36). Because “[c]ulturally dependent responses to trauma are particularly evident in literary texts” (Kurtz 10), fiction has specific utility in extrapolating those culturally dependent responses, especially with such close Freudian influence. Moreover, Freud was not the only influence. Instead, the “preference for modernist and postmodern narrative techniques” which includes silence as a form of aesthetics also influenced such works as *Light in August*. Of this Pederson has argued that the portrayal of trauma in American fiction can be “Eurocentric and privilege a psychological understanding of trauma that is decidedly Western” (Pederson 107). This encapsulation in which survivors of trauma are robbed of memory agency and voice is particularly evident in *Light in August*. While a generalized depiction of fiction, or even American fiction, cannot be based on one novel alone, Faulkner’s influential depictions of racism in the early 20th century south make his work, and *Light in August* in particular, a notable text wherein the influence of cultural ideas on a literary text, specifically a particular understanding of trauma, is both digested and propagated.

It is my argument that how we portray trauma in certain works of fiction has roots, not in the actual processes of trauma, but in how mainstream American society has viewed trauma culturally within the time frame of the work’s creation, and sometimes stretching into perpetuity. For *Light in August*, the time frame of creation is the American modernist period. Thus, *Light in August*, with its backdrop in racism, segregation and injustice, reveals an underlying partial misunderstanding of and discomfort with trauma that is not present in Levi’s work. This misunderstanding is partial because Faulkner examines two particular avenues of trauma—one in which the trauma is inexorably tied to the social and cultural web that creates a vast social

trauma, and the other which is the personal trauma of the main character. The social and systemic nature of trauma bound intergenerationally and socially is astute. However, the *personal* traumas which rob the main character of memory, agency and voice are more indicative of CTT's theoretical underpinnings.

Throughout this essay I use Susan Brison's definition of trauma. Brison, a Professor of Philosophy and Human Ethics at Dartmouth College, and herself a survivor of trauma, defines a traumatic event as "one in which a person feels utterly helpless in the face of a force that is perceived to be life-threatening. The immediate psychological responses to such trauma include terror, loss of control, and intense fear of annihilation" (Brison 38). Because the definition of trauma includes that the "force is perceived to be life-threatening" (38), I use the term "survivor" throughout this essay, while reserving "victim" for individuals who did not survive their encounters. While the word "victim" has taken on a pejorative connotation in recent years, it's my intent to avoid attaching the pejorative to those who have survived life-threatening trauma, or who lost their lives in its face. However, it must also be noted that words used to describe trauma survivors have a way of taking on derogatory meaning. Even the term "survivor" is being replaced in some circles with the word "thrivor" to denote thriving in life after trauma or hardship. Regarding the "unspeakability" of trauma, speaking trauma throughout this essay is defined loosely as any communication, whether written or verbal, that describes or acknowledges the survival of trauma.

Although at times seemingly cumbersome, I also use the full names of Holocaust survivors. This is purposeful. To remove an available name and reduce the person to a generic term defined by violent and non-consensual experience is dehumanizing, especially in the context of the Holocaust where so many were reduced to numbers and ash. My goal is not to take

for myself the right to speak for the people and experiences I study, and in doing so risk the “danger of appropriating the other by assimilation” (Spivak 66), but to make room for the testimony many survivors have already recorded but which goes largely unheard. In relying on already recorded trauma narratives from survivors, my goal is not to claim a right to survivor testimony, but to help create an environment where survivor testimony can be spoken without social shame and imposed silence.

Finding places in which to speak our traumas is paramount to our survival, not just the survival of individual people, but survival as a society. Latching onto the idea that trauma survivors are incapable of memory and speech “eradicates our responsibility toward, and even our complicity with, what has been deemed beyond the range of human thought” (Mandel 206). The idea of unspeakability then harms survivors and society alike, lessening our ability to learn by turning away from the hurtful. This research argues for a shifting of the theoretical framework of CTT in a way that would allow room for both Caruth and McNally, while allowing conversations of trauma in literature to be unharried by the hypothetical inability to speak on the part of trauma survivors, shifting the conversation away from supposed survivor deficiency and toward the silence imposed by listener discomfort.

Chapter II

II. Trauma is Remembered and Spoken

Critical Trauma Theory is rooted in Freudian psychoanalysis, specifically in the theorized Oedipal sexual desire for one's parents. The pleasure principle was conceived in Freud's work with post-pubescent females who had difficulty overcoming an array of what he termed to be neuroses, including simple daydreaming in some cases (Freud, *Hysteria* 25). He posited that the girls had experienced early childhood molestation which would have tied adult psychotic episodes, as well as physical symptoms like rashes around the mouth, to early childhood sexual experience, specifically incest. In one instance, when a young woman vehemently denied having been sexually abused, Freud threatened to discontinue her therapies unless she accepted Freud's account of her "repressed" memories (Powell, "Mislead" 1284). Freud, with an alarming amount of confirmational bias, believed that, regardless of the fact that his early subjects had no memory of assault, the women must have been sexually assaulted in childhood. Instead of adjusting his theory to the testimony and personal histories of the women, which would have required listening to women, he instead believed that their lack of memory of the assaults was not conclusive evidence that they had not been assaulted, but rather that they were assaulted, but had repressed the memory of the trauma, leaving the women with no conscious memory and no ability to speak of the trauma. Freud abandoned seduction theory relatively quickly, but in abandoning that theory he became ardent in the opposite hypothesis—women and children who actually reported being sexual abused were suffering from sexual fantasies and had not, in fact, experienced sexual assault (Powell, "Misinterpret" 563). Freud believed that *Hysteria* was a disorder that was "exclusively female" (Tasca 110). While exclusively female, not all females fit within the parameters of diagnosis, because he excluded from the diagnosis of hysteria (a

diagnosis later removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders or DSM), women who told their trauma story “perfectly clearly and connectedly” because a woman who could speak her trauma so articulately was, according to Freud, clearly not traumatized (*Hysteria* 16). It’s important to note that not only did Freudian psychoanalysis begin with the refusal to listen to women, it resulted in a theory in which women had neither memory nor voice, causing the theory to truly become a “psychology of men” that invalidated the narrative of female experience (Herman 19). This impinged on the women who did not remember experiencing trauma at all, but it also called into question the testimony of, largely, women and children who did remember childhood sexual assaults. Says Richard Webster, a Freud scholar:

In the theory of the Oedipus complex Freud had, in effect, invented a perfect theoretical instrument for explaining away allegations of sexual abuse and undermining [the accuser’s] credibility. Since Freud’s theory held that all children might fantasize about sexual relation with their parents, it followed that recollections of sexual abuse by parents could be construed as fantasies. (513).

In effect, Freud’s Oedipal theories attributed abuse where there was no memory of abuse and called into serious question any actual memory of abuse. Then Freud applied this theory, which he himself admitted was “speculation, often far-fetched speculation” (*Beyond Pleasure* 18), to the trauma he saw coming out of WWI’s battlefields, attributing soldiers’ night terrors and flashbacks to the same inability to remember or speak that he had already attributed to women—weakness. At the end of World War I, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder was not yet a known diagnosis. Instead, trauma symptoms during and after war were attributed to cowardice, especially in the United States and other European countries (Ibbotson 391; Meyer 231). The soldiers returning with PTSD symptoms were the marginalized, but the battlefield wasn’t the

only place marginalized individuals were experiencing the effects of traumatic experience.

Freud's analysis illustrates the marginalized place many trauma survivors already occupy before their traumas. The hypothesis that survivors are incapable of speech effectively silences the trauma testimony of already marginalized survivors, in Freud's case women, children and disabled veterans.

Another problem with the idea that survivors of trauma are affected by the inability to recall or speak the traumatic experience is that it runs contrary to evolutionary biology in which "[f]ear learning is an essential tool for survival" (Seeley 155). Nietzsche communicates the same sentiment when he suggests that "pain is the most powerful aid to mnemonics" (qtd. in Rothberg *Realism* 209). In most human learning, there are many opportunities to learn material. When children learn to walk, or tie a shoe, or to read, they learn step by step, over time. However, some life experiences do not allow for repeated attempts to learn. Those are the experiences for which survival is not guaranteed. In traumatic situations, the brain does not have several attempts to learn, instead survival is predicated on immediate learning and immediate memory encoding. In fact, according to McNally, "Our ancestors who remembered life-threatening situations they had survived would have been more likely to avoid similar dangers in the future than those who failed to remember them" (*Remembering* 62). There are several mechanisms of the brain that control the encoding of traumatic memory, ensuring prospective survival. According to McNally, PTSD develops in the brain as a safety mechanism. The brain is signaling that, were this event to happen again, one might not survive the event, so learning must happen immediately. There are several processes in the brain that aid memory in survival situations. Hormonally, the brain releases cortisol, which has been shown to enhance memory, not impair it (Wingenfeld 37). Far from erasing memory of the traumatic event, "peripheral stress hormones released during an

emotionally arousing event influence memory storage” (Reist 377). Thus, “emotional arousal has been shown to enhance memory” (Reist 377). Not only are those memories intact, but memories formed under the hyper arousal of trauma “often remain vivid throughout the life of the individual” (Reist 377). The amygdala and hypothalamus also act in trauma with the emotional memory “imprint[ing] into the amygdala” which “holds the emotional significance of the event, including the intensity and impulse of emotion” (McClelland “Trauma and the Brain”). These processes in the brain to enhance memory are not hypothetical, instead “clinical research on Holocaust survivors has repeatedly emphasized the vividness of their horrific memories” (McNally 211). This is not surprising as “high emotional arousal makes for vivid, detailed memories.” The problem, then, is not that the “videographer leaves” (Caruth 6) but that it works overtime, the emotional component of the amygdala building sensory enhanced memory (McNally 211). Trauma is not the only stressor that has an enhancing effect on memory but any “short, acute stressor may have enhancing effects on prospective memory in healthy humans” (Piefke 358).

While some memory issues are associated with trauma, and more specifically Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, it is not the memory of the trauma that is impaired, but memory associated with normal life. The memory impairment described in the DSM, which is the leading and accepted manual for diagnosing mental health conditions, for the diagnosis of PTSD “refers to forgetfulness in everyday life that emerges after exposure to a traumatic even; it does not refer to difficulty remembering the traumatic event itself” (McNally, “Progress and Controversy” 242). For instance, while a trauma survivor may well remember every detail of a sexual assault or a combat experience or an incident of physical abuse, the trauma survivor might have difficulty remembering a doctor’s appointment, an anniversary, an assignment or a telephone call

from a friend the day before. In fact, the memory impairments that Holocaust survivors experience later in life were the result of the long influence of cortisol in the brain, cortisol that was released in the brain in response to the traumatic memory. The brain remembers the trauma so well that the stress hormone cortisol is released over a prolonged period of time, ultimately damaging the brain (Hebert 410). The brain is not damaged because one cannot recall, but because one recalls so well and so long that the stress hormones released from remembering eventually disrupts brain function. Remarkably, the traumas are still remembered, but memory of daily activity that is non-trauma related shows impairment. Continuing research into the brain mechanisms in trauma continues to throw Freudian ideas of trauma unrememberability into question as researchers find “intact memories among people who have suffered both mild traumas and severe traumas” (Pope 213).

More damning of the belief that our greatest traumas are unavailable is the plethora of people who have survived horrific traumas and still remember. In fact, the more violent the trauma, the more easily survivors seem to recall those traumas, even remembering in ways they don’t wish and at times that are unexpected. During the actual trauma, the brain can latch on sensory input and later becomes highly sensitive to things that remind the brain of that sensory input (Friedman 586; Akin 323). For instance, many survivors of roadside bombings in war describe scent of barbeque grilling as triggering because the brain remembers so vividly the scent of burning flesh and connects that with the initial trauma, warning the individual that they are in danger (Baggio 63). Memory of trauma is vital for biological survival, beyond the fact that “[m]emory is important to many survivors of the Holocaust for they often remember and honor those who were mercilessly and senselessly murdered during the Shoah and thus cannot speak for themselves” (Sterling 197). A comprehensive review of Holocaust narrative reveals, not the

inability to remember, but the inability to forget paired with a desire to speak that all too often finds no listeners.

Primo Levi was an Italian-Jewish chemist who was imprisoned at Auschwitz from February 1944 through the camps liberation in January 1945. In his memoirs of his death camp survival Levi describes detailed memory of his experience of the Holocaust as well as a severe compulsion, not to silence, but to speak. Levi writes, “The need to tell our stories to ‘the rest,’ to make ‘the rest’ participate in it, had taken on for us, before our liberation and after, the character of an immediate and violent impulse, to the point of competing with our other elementary needs” (Levi 9). For Levi, there was a difference between the physical liberation from Auschwitz and the “internal liberation” (9). It was through writing, through the communication of his trauma survival, that Levi claimed his internal liberation, writing his memories in order of the “urgency” of speech (10). Despite the desperation and clarity with which Levi wrote, his original publication in 1947 was ignored, the work not having success until more than ten years after publication.

Levi wasn’t the only person to feel this compulsion to speak his experiences after trauma. To Jean Amery “suddenly everything demanded telling” (Amery xii). His writings show little sign of memory loss, instead he writes, “I recall times when I climbed heedlessly over piled-up corpses and all of us were too weak or too indifferent even to drag the dead out of the barracks into the open” (Amery 15). Truly, Holocaust survivor narratives show no sign of memory or speech impairment “[r]ather, in such realistic texts, the trauma narrative passes straight through the landscape of pain, describing the difficult sights along the way” (Pederson “Narrative” 107).

While some survivors turned to writing, others turned to oral testimony. Researchers have collected hundreds and thousands of hours of Holocaust survivor’s testimony, in which survivors

vividly recall their experiences. A team of these researchers noted that “people comprehend and remember deeply traumatic experiences, and . . . ultimately adapt” (Kraft 1). In fact, there seems to be no shortage of Holocaust or war narratives, which disputes the assertion that our deepest traumas are unavailable to us, nor do many survivors desire them to be forgotten. Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel noted that he is “afraid of forgetting” (Wiesel, *Sea* 410).

In some instances, faced with a paucity of socially appropriate places to tell their stories, Holocaust survivors have themselves set up “interview projects called ‘historical commissions’” to facilitate the thousands of survivors wanting the opportunity to speak their experiences” (Rosen 10). The historical commissions set up by survivors, for survivors, recorded between ten and twenty thousand testimonies by 1947 (High 148). Firsthand accounts of survivors poured in as “from 1945 to 1949, interviews with victims were conducted at a stunning pace: over 7,000 in Poland, more than 2,500 in Germany, close to 3,700 in Hungary” accounting for more than ten thousand individual victim testimonies in a four-year time span, and that count only includes interviews conducted by state agencies (*Wonder*, Rosen 9). From Lithuania alone, transcribed survivor testimony accounts for 1700 pages of text, most of which remains unpublished because of “disinterest” (*Wonder*, Rosen 30). Tens of thousands of recorded testimonies is hardly indicative of a people unable to speak or remember some of the greatest traumas in human history. However, it is indicative of survivors of trauma seeking Levi’s “internal liberation” which, while reclaiming identity and autonomy, makes “testimony a verb” (High 145).

The internal liberation of trauma communication is not without purpose. The communication of trauma is essential for healing as “meaning needs to be made from the situation, and this process is facilitated by meaningful human interaction” (Beck 125). The communication of trauma is helped by the fact that survivors showed clear, detailed memory,

even decades after liberation. Survivors of Camp Erika were interviewed at liberation and then decades later. Researchers noted, “There is no doubt that almost all witnesses remember Camp Erika in great detail, even after 40 years” (Wagenaar 84). The spoken trauma, four decades apart, reveals in these cases “[a] remarkable degree of remembering” (Wagenaar 80). The verbal testimony, and the necessary accompanying memory, belies the idea of an unrememberable, unspeakable trauma, because, if trauma was unremembered or unspeakable, the horrific and long-lasting nature of these multiple traumas would be the very kind the mind would seek to eradicate from experience. Instead, these traumas are remembered and spoken in vivid detail, including the following:

“Three times I stood in front of the gas chamber and lived. Not many can say this. We have to believe in God, only we must not forget.” –Charlotte Hirsch, Auschwitz survivor. (qtd in Lewin 47)

“I lost my mother and twenty-eight aunts, uncles and cousins—all killed. To be a survivor has meant to me to be a witness because being quiet would not be fair to the ones that did not survive.” –Hinda Kibort, Stutthof labor camp survivor (55).

“You can try to have a normal life, but you can’t forget.” –Peter Gersh, Plaschau labor camp survivor (33).

“They threw my [infant] son in the fire. How do you forget something like that?” –Henry Freier, Auschwitz survivor (29).

“It was over for a while. It is still not over. Twenty-two years later I am still dangling over the ground by dislocated arms, panting, and accusing myself. In such an instant there is no “repression.” –Jean Amery, Auschwitz survivor (Amery 36).

Despite the violence and loss associated with the trauma memory, survivors have repeatedly shared those experiences, which has been essential for social understanding. Survivor testimony has been essential in describing death camps.

Many survivors have testified at peril of their own lives and despite personal feelings of shame. The *sonderkommando* at Auschwitz were Jewish death camp prisoners chosen by Nazi guards and either assigned leadership roles within the camp or instead work in the crematoriums and gas chambers. Many of the *sonderkommando* in leadership positions participated in Nazi sanctioned physical abuse against other prisoners. All were equally hated as traitors to their people. The *sonderkommando* received a greater amount of food rations and, because their work put them in direct contact with the dead, were able to scavenge for food through the personal possessions of the recently murdered. This greater ability to scavenge allowed the *sonderkommando* to locate contraband including paper and writing instruments. Heedless of the immediate peril that came from possessing paper and pen, many *sonderkommando* wrote down testimonies of the atrocities of Auschwitz and buried the testimony in jars beneath the buildings. Jars with testimony are still being discovered on the grounds. One *sonderkommando* writes of the desire “to etch the sight of life, still pulsing now, deep into the heart, and forever to carry the pictures of these lives, which expired before our eyes, deep in the heart” (Greif 32). Importantly, “the existence of *sonderkommando* writings has major implications for arguments concerning the Holocaust’s unsayability or unrepresentability... severely undermining prominent Critical Trauma theorist Dori Laub’s allegation that the Holocaust ‘produced no witnesses’” (Chare 14).

Cornelia Loewendorff-de Haff and Schewa Melzer both experienced tortuous medical experimentation at Auschwitz, including the injection of harmful and radioactive substances into their uteruses. Melzer was able to recall other women, and their nationalities, who were

subjected to radiation burns on their ovaries. Both women were able to recall the doctor who performed the experiments, the nurses who assisted, the facilities in which the experimentations took place, as well as the number of injections and the time period between injections (Georges 162). Even though the doctor who performed these operations killed himself in prison before his trial, both women still sought the opportunity to testify at his posthumous trial, the testimony being that important to them. Regardless of the degree or specific nature of the trauma, survivors consistently sought opportunities to speak.

Auschwitz was not the only death camp to see such writings, nor was the drive to testimony felt only in the death camps. Indeed, “the compilation and archiving of documents by Oyneg Shabes in Warsaw was massively more extensive than what prisoners in Auschwitz were able to carry out, but the impulse to collect and record had much in common” (Chare 12). The compilation of trauma narrative from Holocaust survivors cuts across gender, age and nationality and took the form of many types of narrative. The narratives were not composed only by those in death camps. In the introduction to *The Holocaust: Memories and History*, editor Victoria Khiterer points out that “[m]any Jews in the Warsaw ghetto, who did not hope to survive the war, wrote diaries and hid them in a clandestine archive” (xii). In the absence of an ability to write but possessing cameras, George Kadish and Mendel Grossman turned to photography. George Kadish explained, “I felt it was a HISTORICAL ORDER [sic] to bring the terrible happenings in the ghetto to the outside world, to our future children and generations to come so that they would clearly know what happened during that time” (qtd. in Cohen 91). Mendel Grossman described his photography as a “moral imperative” (qtd. in Cohen 93). Grossman sought “to leave to the world—if a world was to remain—a tangible testimony of the great tragedy of the horrible crime, in a language understood by all nations of the world” (qtd. in Arie

101). Chaim Kaplan also kept a diary of his experiences as he watched his neighbors detained and deported. Kaplan wrote in that diary “[a]nyone who keeps such a record endangers his life, but this does not frighten me” (Chaim Kaplan qtd. in Wiesel *Against* 100). The endangerment of his life was less important to Kaplan than the words of his testimony. The day before Kaplan was killed, he wrote in his diary “[m]y utmost concern is for hiding my diary so that it will be preserved for future generations. As long as my pulse beats I shall continue my sacred task” (101).

These examples show that the compulsion to speak trauma can overcome even the drive to survive and even at great personal peril (Greif 37). The ability to recall and narrate trauma started before, and did not stop after, liberation. This impulse to trauma testimony illustrates that “writing and resistance were inextricably bound” (Chare 12), specifically because, as illustrated by the Holocaust, aggressors weaponize silence. Refusing that imposed silence is a form of resistance. CTT as it is currently constituted cannot survive the mountain of personal testimony from Holocaust survivors that shows trauma is both viscerally remembered and compulsively spoken. Moreover “denying the Holocaust’s representability . . . leads to foreclosure regarding issues of moral agency in contemporary and historical testimonies” (Chare 18).

The many ways Holocaust victims and survivors sought to leave a permanent depiction of their experiences contrasts sharply with the idea of an unknowable, unremembered, unspoken trauma, but instead illustrates individuals fully aware and cognizant within their trauma situation and actively using moral agency to document the experience, thus fully possessing memory, voice and agency. That focus on memory, agency and voice is evident in contemporary literature as “[s]o significant in North American Jewish literature are bearing witness to the Holocaust and consideration of post-Holocaust Jewish identity that many

characters are identified as scribes, researchers, prosecutors, witnesses, moral mentors, teachers and returned Jews” (Kremer 147). Both during the events of the Holocaust and afterward, survivors consistently sought the opportunity to speak, even during the most violent of traumas.

Nor was the Holocaust an event that singularly produced survivors who remembered their traumas and sought opportunities to speak. Solomon Northup, a Black man born in New York, was kidnapped and sold into southern slavery in 1841. He was not freed until more than a decade later in 1853. After claiming freedom following a decade of serious trauma, Solomon Northup narrated the experiences of his slavery, including personal traumas, and the trauma from watching violence inflicted on others. Just as there is no dearth of Holocaust narrative, Northup’s account, written almost immediately after his escape, illustrates that no enslaved person seems to forget his enslavement. Instead, these are the very scenarios in which the brain understands that to fail to record, to fail to learn, is to risk annihilation at the very next incident, in line with McNally’s reasoning that “[o]ur ancestors who remembered life-threatening situations they had survived would have been more likely to avoid similar dangers in the future” (*Remembering* 62). Remembering trauma is important not only for the individual, but also perhaps for society as well. The Jewish Holocaust and African enslavement, not to mention the Native American Holocaust, impact not only those individuals, but their progeny for generations, their cultures and the society in which the destruction is allowed. Not only is there obvious remembrance for survivors, but there is also a documented drive to communicate that trauma, even when that testimony remains socially unheard by societies unwilling to come to terms with past abuses and traumas.

The same ability to remember and compulsion to communicate is evidenced in other human atrocities as well. On September 11, 2001, terrorists killed 2,977 Americans, including

eight children. Viewers watched, on a loop on many television stations, the two towers of the World Trade Center fall in flames. This event became a universal American trauma, whether by being at ground zero during the attacks, or watching deaths televised. The actions of American society after that trauma is telling. It is not forgotten. It is not unspoken. Rather, the trauma of 9/11 produced a plethora of “never forget” posters, eyewitness accounts taken in the aftermath, and national as well as community remembrance projects. Published writing of this event specifically, despite the fact that it happened so recently, includes novels, short stories, children’s books and graphic novels, as well as non-fictional personal narrative. The anniversary of the attacks is an official day of observation, of remembrance. Memorials and museums dedicated to this one particular experience of terrorism also call for remembrance. Yet, the terrorist attacks on 9/11 are treated differently than other traumas. There is no social code of silence. Instead, this “cultural trauma” is publicly permitted to be “recollected, narrated and visualized” in a socially permissive way that other individual traumas lack (Sielke 386). This lends credence to the possibility that “the silence that greets trauma in texts may be...political” (Pederson “Narrative” 102).

In the chapters that follow, the critical examination of survivor testimony in many different human atrocities allows a picture to emerge of victims and survivors who find speech so compelling they even put themselves in jeopardy to document the trauma. Far from the absence of memory, voice and agency, these survivors claim all three and speak their experiences. The conclusion that survivors are the problem in regard to trauma communication is focused in the wrong direction. While CTT focuses on the survivor’s supposed inability and not on society’s reticence to listen, important truths are missed. The empirical problems with Freud’s research began with focusing his analysis on the individual survivor and not on the society in

which that survivor navigates post-trauma life. This is evident in many other Freudian studies. When examining why women might claim memories of sexual abuse, Freud blamed the women's hypothetical Oedipal desires, focusing on the women and not on their abusers. He attempted to explain anti-Semitism by examining the behavior of the Jews, not by examining their oppressors, linking oppression and social shame to the victim and not the actions of the oppressor (Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*). CTT is likewise focused on the actions of trauma survivors, and not on the society which silences those survivors. The answer to why trauma seems unspeakable lies with the listeners and deserves careful examination and attention.

Chapter III

III. Trauma is Socially Forgotten and Unheard

From 1945 to 1949, psychologist David Boder conducted hundreds of interviews with Holocaust survivors. Survivors who wanted to share their experiences were plentiful, but Boder encountered several problems. First, Boder noticed that his facial expressions and body language in response to the spoken trauma had a quieting effect on his interviewees. As survivors spoke, if the atrocity was hard to hear, or seemed unbelievable, Boder's own responses stymied speech. Understanding that it was his own shortcomings as an interviewer that stopped speech, Boder attempted having survivors speak to his back (Colotla 71). However, speaking to his back proved to be so awkward that it also stopped survivor speech. In the end, Boder hung a sheet between himself and the interviewees. With the sheet in place, Boder found that survivors were able to recall and narrate their experiences much more efficiently. That wasn't the last of Boder's obstacles. Boder writes of himself that "in so many cases the interviewer [Boder] could not help becoming perplexed by the story" so much so that during the interviews he unintentionally became lost in the story and would "not hear" details shared by the interviewees as he "lost the thread of language" (qtd. in Rosen *Wonder* 23). Boder's own disorientation in the narrative, a disorientation he recognizes, leads him to repeatedly ask interviewees to repeat themselves or further explain until his own receptive ability was able to catch up to the expressive communication of the interviewees (*Wonder*, Rosen 24).

Consider the following excerpt from an interview with Marko Moskowitz, a nineteen-year-old interviewee who survived the Birkenau concentration camp as recorded in Alan Rosen's book, *The Wonder of their Voices: The 1946 Holocaust Interviews of David Boder*:

Moskovitz: There was a...a forest, and in that forest there was a huge pit.

Boder: Yes?

Moskovitz: And in that pit black pitch was always poured.

Boder: What?

Moskovitz: Such a black tar which...which is poured on streets.

Boder: Yes, which?

Moskovitz: This is poured in.

Boder: Yes?

Moskovitz: This was ignited, and this was burning day and night and the people were being continuously thrown in.

Boder: Oh . . .” (*Wonder*, Rosen 24).

In this communication, the nineteen-year-old interviewee patiently waits for the interviewer to catch up. It is not Moskovitz’ communication that is impaired, but Boder’s, who admits that he has trouble “following the account” (24). In interview after interview Boder is seen “trying, but often failing, to follow its diabolical episodes and expressions” (27). Importantly, Boder did not believe that trauma impaired memory, but rather impaired his own ability, as a researcher, to “measure the kinds and degrees of inflicted suffering” (29). The publication of Boder’s interviews was stymied for years, not by survivors who were reticent to speak, or who could not remember, but by a lack of outside interest. Even Boder’s university of employment, the Illinois Institute of Technology, had no interest in Boder’s work. The majority of Boder’s work remained unpublished until nearly 40 years after his death “because most publishers believed the public wasn’t interested in Nazi atrocities and the books covering them didn’t sell” (Cortola, 70).

Unfortunately, the publishers were correct. Even with this abundance of testimony, finding people to listen to narratives proved difficult. While the *Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank was published in 1947, scholar Peter Novick argues that American audiences were hesitant to engage a subject that involved a female child as a murder victim. According to Michael Rothberg “only after the 1960’s could survivors and others who come after begin to bring their respective experiences and expectations to bear on each other in the public sphere” (*Realism* 38). When survivors made room for themselves to speak openly about the nature and extent of their traumas “instead of calls for realism, [they] found attacks on realism and calls for silence” (Rothberg 108). The call for silence revealed only “inadequate responses rendered by a world anxious to avoid coming to terms with the extreme conditions produced during the twentieth century” (119). Elie Wiesel and other survivors found against this avoidance by urging fellow survivors to write, saying “[t]hat was the obsession during the war—to write, to write to write. And that must be their duty now. I am going to establish a special fund to publish all these testimonies. Since in most cases we cannot find commercial publishers, we shall find other means to publish them” (Wiesel, *Against* 109). In fact, public interest in Holocaust acknowledgement only increased after the publication of Elie Wiesel’s *Night*, which spotlights a living survivor, thereby making the topic much more palatable to American audiences (Novick 162). While *Night*’s publication in 1960 saw an increase in public attention, Novick marks 1973 as the year public interest skyrocketed (Novick 165).

The earlier reticence to hear survivor testimony was felt by the survivors themselves. Jules Zaidenweber, who survived Dachau said, “After the war, people didn’t want to listen to you talk about the Holocaust” (qtd. in Lewin 108). Ruth Kluger, another death camp survivor, described her listeners in general: “If they did listen, it was in a certain pose, an attitude assumed

for this special occasion; it was not as partners in a conversation, but as if I had imposed on them and they were graciously indulging me” (High 147). The problem was never the speakers, but the listeners who were difficult to find, leaving trauma narratives unpublished for decades while “thousands of ...interviews collected by the historical commissions of Germany, Hungary, Poland and elsewhere are simply overlooked” (Rosen 31). For these survivors, the experience of trauma survival compelled expressive speech in line with Levi’s internal liberation, but that speech could not be received because of the impaired receptive ability of listeners. This is because, according to Naomi Mandel, hearing someone speaking the unspeakable “diminish[es] the distance between us and that realm, highlighting the complex relation between what language includes and excludes, and forcing us to confront the implications of such effacement for thinking, writing, and speaking about what has been assumed to be unspeakable” (205).

The actions of Holocaust survivors speaking what is socially unspeakable, and their lack of reception, mirrors a problem common among trauma survivors: Even as many trauma survivors seek appropriate venues to claim their stories, those venues are made unavailable by not only negative social reactions to the trauma narrative, but also the commodification of trauma narrative which puts particular emphasis on only positive trauma tropes, or trauma stories packaged for consumption. This harkens back to the lack of initial reception for Anne Frank’s diary. Tim Cole uses *Schindler’s List* to illustrate this point—that it is not the Holocaust that audiences seek to understand, but instead it’s the “*representation* of those events that triggered interest” (Cole xiii). Speaking of *Schindler’s List* in particular, Cole argues that the reason for the film’s success is not its realistic representation of the Holocaust, but rather that it allows audiences to focus on “1100 Polish Jews who were saved, rather than killed, during the

Holocaust” (Cole xii). Creating of Holocaust history something that is palatable for audiences commodifies the trauma narrative. Survivor Sally Grubman explains the experience this way:

[T]eachers invite me into their classrooms to speak, but they do not want me to make the Holocaust a sad experience. They want me to turn us into heroes and create a heroic experience...but the Holocaust was never a history of courage and resistance. It was a destruction by fire of innocent people, and it's not right to make it something it never was. (qtd. in Greenspan 44-45)

Beyond asking for curated survivor testimony and films focusing on the “positive” aspects of the experience, films like *Life is Beautiful* and *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, not to mention numerous fictional pieces set during the Holocaust, all make trauma experiences palatable, which represents the Holocaust, but in a way that focuses particular attention on maximum consumability. However, survivor narratives are many times communicated, not for consumption, but for teaching and testimony. While fiction packaged to consume is received, nonfiction packaged to teach is often met with negative social reaction, which silences survivor speech and embraces the “false sense that true knowledge has been achieved” (Pederson, “Narrative” 98).

Negative social reactions to trauma can include accidental negative reactions as well as more overt negative reactions. Accidental negative reactions to trauma disclosure are often the facial expressions and body language which signal survivors that the hearer is uncomfortable, as illustrated in Boder’s accidental silencing of interviewees. Unable to immediately process the horrific nature of the trauma narratives, Boder found that the survivors he interviewed stopped speaking openly when his facial expressions or body language revealed awe or disbelief. Understanding that the impairment of his receptive ability was impairing the expressive language

of his interviewees, Boder took compassionate action to still enable speech. In Boder's interviews, the trauma survivors had to communicate the trauma multiple times to help Boder, the listener, process the information. The receptive language of the listener was impaired, not the expressive language of the survivor (Rosen 23). Listening to trauma requires a willingness to move beyond the general bounds of comfort as "listening to another's trauma is tension inducing" (Lewis 286). When confronted with trauma disclosure, "the fundamental impulse is to turn away" (*Defiance*, Rosen 6). This is perhaps evident when we consider the cold reception of early Holocaust memoirs, such *The Diary of a Young Girl*, or Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*.

In her groundbreaking work "Psychotherapist's Participation in the Conspiracy of Silence About the Holocaust," Yael Danieli explains possibly the most impactful study not only on the effects of listening to trauma on the listener, but also how that discomfort is projected back onto trauma survivors. Danieli studied 61 therapists and researchers who each treated a Holocaust survivor and/or their offspring. It is important to note in this discussion that Danieli studied trained therapists who were educated and practiced in listening. These are usually the people most competent in hearing trauma, and yet even these had significant difficulties listening and projected that difficulty back onto the survivor. The responses to trauma narrative by clinicians illustrates the problem in society at large. If even trained clinicians in America, who are educated in providing therapeutic guidance, have these responses to spoken trauma, we can extrapolate how much more difficult it is for society at large to work against cultural training that considers trauma speech inappropriate.

The therapists studied had varied harsh and inappropriate reactions to hearing the trauma narrative. Some listeners admitted feeling guilt at their own happy lives which led them to "not

wanting to hear” (28). This guilt experienced by listeners serves as a “defense when they experience their helplessness” (28). Unfortunately, this guilt often turned to rage. The listeners who claimed feelings of guilt “often reported that they became enraged listening to Holocaust stories and were overwhelmed by the intensity of their own reactions” (29). The uncomfortable feelings of their own rage led many listeners to “accuse victims of bringing the Holocaust upon themselves” (29) while others “reported experiencing murderous feelings toward” survivors or their offspring (29) because the listeners were unable to process spoken trauma without experiencing their own fight or flight responses. This illustrates that, many times, it is simply not safe to speak trauma. Based on their own feelings of rage at the trauma narratives, some of the therapists cut off psychotherapy services completely (30). Instead of guilt and rage, other therapists reacted with dread and horror: “I dread being drawn into a vortex of such blackness that I many never find clarity” (30). The prevention of spoken trauma was not just caused by dread and horror by also by “disgust and loathing” which many times led the therapist “to prohibit survivors and their offspring from telling their stories” (31). These therapists, acting as listeners to trauma, felt “contemptuous toward and condemn[ed] survivors for having been victims, and as such, weak, vulnerable, and abused” (31). Focus on the believed fragility of survivors “overlook[s] the fact that these were people who had not only survived, but they had rebuilt families and lives—often literally on ashes—despite their experiences” (Danieli 27). Conversely, for the particular subset of listeners who began to see the survivor as “superhumanly strong, capable, heroic figures” there was no room made for the survivors to feel the pain, grief and loss of such experiences (Danieli 33). While the strength of the emotion was strong across therapists, the particular emotion felt varied by each individual. However, regardless of which

strong emotion the therapist felt, those emotions were cross-sectionally inappropriately applied to the survivor themselves.

Additionally, some listeners reported feelings of jealousy at the “special status” of the survivor, a status which, undoubtedly, a survivor would gladly give up to not have the experiences in the first place (Danieli 26). Some listeners even downplayed the Holocaust experience with “we are all survivors” reactions (26). Feelings like these in people who hear trauma illustrate a desire in the listener to be included in a group to avoid feeling “like an outsider” (33) again placing the focus on the listener, in this case a paltry desire to be included. In Danieli’s research, feelings of jealousy toward survivors also focused on the “moral stature” attached to survivors which led listeners to “feel inferior” (33). Many of these listeners accused survivors of using “the Holocaust to feel special” (37) and categorized survivor testimony as “just a variant of narcissism” (37). This jealousy didn’t just attach to the survivors themselves, but also their offspring, with many therapists “envying the fact that survivor’s offspring are by definition members of a special group with its own identity” (33). Many of the therapists who reported feelings of envy and jealousy toward the survivor’s offspring eventually “condemned” the offspring for whom they were supposed to provide therapeutic services for “using their parents’ suffering to claim this special status” (33). Notably, it was the therapists who saw the status as somehow special, not the offspring. Nonetheless, it was the survivors and their offspring, the people giving trauma narrative, who bore the negative feelings and reactions from the listener, which included silencing.

Although listening is uncomfortable and may bring uncomfortable feelings, that discomfort is a far cry from the brutality and trauma of the lived experience. The discomfort of hearing a trauma experience should not be the controlling factor in whether trauma is socially

appropriate to speak. The speaker will always have survived much worse than the discomfort of listening, especially as “Nazi Germany created a reality far worse than any fantasy normally available to the human psyche” (29). This illustrates that trauma is always harder to live than it is to hear and yet the discomfort of hearing is socially controlling. Their own feelings of dread and horror “led therapists and researchers to prevent survivors from recounting any Holocaust memories “instead preferring to “chang[e] the subject” (Danieli 30) or to tune out when survivors “kept complaining” (34). It is important to note that despite differences in which strong emotion the therapists felt after hearing trauma, each therapist acted in a defensive way as if the survivors themselves were a physical threat which hindered helpful and reliable treatment.

Upon hearing trauma, these listeners felt shame, guilt, horror, disgust, dread, envy and jealousy, which, in each case led to a negative reaction towards the trauma survivor. None of these problems in listening has anything whatsoever to do with the speaker, either in memory, agency or voice, but with a listener’s inability to simply listen. Survivors of trauma are not without voice, they are without listeners; trauma is not unspeakable, only unhearable. Speaking specifically on the Holocaust, but in a way that can be applied to the survival of many other human-inflicted traumas, hearing of these injustices and depravities “shatter[s] our naïve belief that the world . . . is a just place in which human life is of value” and the desire to avoid confronting this “may have caused many in society to avoid the Holocaust by refusing to listen to survivors and their offspring, those who bear witness to it and to its consequences” (Danieli 31). Further, the discomfort with hearing trauma narratives from trauma survivors is seen not only in therapists but instead “is part of the conspiracy of silence that has characterized the interaction between survivors and society at large since the end of World War II” (Danieli 24).

The reactions of these therapists mirror a social and cultural reaction to any spoken or written trauma, not only the Holocaust. In 2015, a researchers interviewed bereaved individuals who had lost family members to traffic accidents (Breen). The study concluded that individuals suffering the death of a loved one are likely to see the collapse of their social circles as well. “The informants reported significant and permanent changes in their social support networks following the deaths of their loved ones” (Breen 110). While the interviewed acknowledged the relief they felt to talk about their dead loved ones, the inability to find people who were willing to listen disenfranchised their grief. (Breen 106). This further evidences the silencing through “social pressure from listeners who display signs of discomfort with loss-oriented narrative content” (Baddeley 205). Even people who were in the closest social circles before the death, failed to provide social support after the death. Friends in the “informants’ social networks ignored or failed to acknowledge the loss through appearing uncomfortable when the deceased was mentioned, attempting to change the subject away from the deceased and the events of their deaths, or avoiding these topics altogether” (Breen 110). In fact, the greater the grief, the more likely the bereaved would see a collapse of social supports. Parents who lost young children were most likely to see the collapse of social supports. Although the loss of a child is a situation in which one would need to depend on friend and family members, “others are more likely to avoid people grieving the death of a child than another loved one, supporting the notion that the death of a child is particularly stigmatizing” (Breen 110). The silencing was more than just not being able to verbally speak a trauma to one’s social circle. Several bereaved also reported the discomfort of their social circles around any indication or reminder of the trauma. After suffering the loss of their children in car crashes, several bereaved mothers were told by colleagues at work to remove their children’s photos from their desks (Breen 108). Others experienced family

members attempting to remove the photos of dead loved ones from their homes in an effort to “help heal” (Breen 108). The “help” was unwanted and further isolated the bereaved in their trauma. Disenfranchised grief is the result of a culture and society that makes trauma unspeakable, as it silences survivors. As we have seen the “unspeakability of trauma” has less to do with the brain’s power to process and more to do with society’s reticence, and many times outright hostility, toward spoken trauma or reminders of others’ trauma. Indeed, there is a “distinction between what is physically unspeakable [and] what is socially unspeakable, how these realms are determined, and the extent to which they interact” (Mandel 205).

Beyond bereavement, researcher Courtney Ahrens also documented the negative reactions to trauma disclosure from victims of sexual assault. The negative reactions to trauma disclosures made victims of sexual assault less likely to speak out in the future. In her research she found that “[r]ape survivors who speak out about their assault experiences are often punished for doing so,” (Ahrens 263). Negative reactions to trauma disclosures made the survivor less likely to speak out again, often fearing that future disclosures would not be effective, or that victim blaming would occur (263). She also identified negative social reactions as the cause of reinforcing feelings of self-blame, leading to silencing rape victims. Silencing rape victims can lead many survivors to “decide that it is too risky to continue to speak about their victimization” (Ullman 75). Sarah E. Ullman, who researches sexual assault in the US, argues that Ahrens’ research “suggests that negative social reactions originate from the social climate that both inhibits sexual assault disclosure initially and discourages victims who do disclose from continuing to talk about their assaults” (Ullman 76). Both Ullman’s and Ahrens’ research serves to illustrate the “relationship between negative social reactions and silence” (Ahrens 264).

Belying the “unspeakability” of trauma, nearly two-thirds of rape survivors do speak out to at least one person (Ahrens 263). However, when survivors do speak out, “[a]nywhere from one-quarter to three-quarters of survivors receive negative social reactions from at least one member of their informal support network,” (Ahrens 263). These negative social reactions are not without consequence: “When rape survivors are exposed to victim-blaming behaviors or attitudes, the experience may feel like a ‘second assault’ or a ‘second rape,’ a phenomenon known as “secondary victimization”” (Ahrens 264). The #MeToo movement demonstrates the fact that publicly claiming trauma can have negative social consequences. While survivors the of sexual assault who supported the #MeToo movement by publicly claiming their experiences helping to show the prevalence of sexual assault through public solidarity with other survivors, many others “participated in #MeToo in a manner that mocked survivors, harassed survivors...minimized survivor’s experiences” (Bogen 274).

The public mockery is the reality for more than just rape survivors. In May 2014, Bailey Loverin wrote an op-ed advocating the use of “trigger warnings” to warn trauma survivors, specifically survivors of sexual assault, that something potentially triggering of past traumas would be brought up, especially in the classroom. The word “trigger” is specific verbiage to describe anything that both reminds individuals with PTSD of their trauma situation and elicits fight or flight responses in the brain, many times in the context of flashbacks. Women are twice as likely to develop PTSD than men, possibly because domestic abuse and sexual assaults are leading causes (US Department of Veteran’s Affairs; Chivers-Wilson 111). Loverin’s advocacy for trigger warnings were not without merit, given the number of students entering college campuses with some kind of trauma in their past. However, instead of entering a conversation about the myriad ways trauma enters our institutions, trigger warnings became a target of public

mockery. Mockery of trauma works to silence survivors from publicly claiming trauma, however, it also reinforces the idea that survivors of trauma are viewed socially as “weak” (Hanlon). The social stigma attached to trauma disclosure reduces the survivor “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (Goldstein 115). William Faulkner’s *Light in August*, covered in depth in the next chapter, is particularly helpful in showcasing the social idea that trauma survivors are “tainted” and how that idea bleeds into fictional trauma.

The “tainted” nature of fictional trauma survivors, who are many times, like Faulkner’s Joe Christmas, written in silence, does not hold true for actual trauma survivors, no matter the specific type of trauma. In working with refugees, Blackburn “discovered many people who were prepared to stand up and make their voice heard against injustice and oppression but whose voice had been robbed or silenced by force” (Blackburn 98). However, more telling is that this silencing continued even after the refugees relocated to a host country because “the population of the host country often does not want to be confronted by gross human rights violations and therefore maintains a conspiracy of silence, a culture of disbelief, and a desire to reject the very stories that refugees bring with them” (Blackburn 98). In the context of the Rwandan genocide author Catherine Gilbert specifically challenges the notion of the unremembered and unspeakable trauma noting that “survivors do not find their experiences “unsayable,” but rather “unhearable” (Gilbert 1).

The “unhearable” nature of trauma has long been established. Although used most often in the context of psychology, the idea of narrative “tellability” was first argued by William Labov and Joshua Waletzky, both linguists. In the case of tellability, these researchers specifically analyzed, through discourse analysis, the oral telling of personal narrative. In the original theory forwarded by Labov, for a personal narrative to be tellable “(1) the actions

performed must be difficult; (2) initially the situation must pose a predicament; (3) in an otherwise normal sequence of events unexpected events occur; (4) some aspect of the situation . . . must be unusual or strange” (Labov qtd. in Robinson 59; Labov 12-44). The range of tellability, like many things, crosses over well between the two academic disciplines of English language and psychology, so much so that the range of tellability has been particularly useful in psychology for analyzing trauma narrative.

As used in psychology, the range of tellability describes how socially accepted it is to tell trauma narrative depending on the type of trauma and the positivity or negativity of the narrative. Lower bounding traumas on the scale include traumas that are familiar and told in a positive way that highlights a happy ending. Traumas on the higher bounding end of tellability include those traumas that are more visceral, not readily understood and told with the pain and hardship of the event intact without adding positivity (Yeo 2). Bereavement from the loss of a child is at the high end of “tellability” along with life altering injuries in youth, meaning that the experiences are so upper bounding they merge into “impropriety” (Yeo 2). For instance, a young man with a spinal cord injury was unable to find the social space to relate the experience because “due to its transgressive, unwelcome, and frightening nature . . . [spinal cord injury] is a narrative that people prefer not to hear and find it very difficult to listen to on those occasions when it confronts them” (Sparkes 231). The importance here is that it is the listener’s comfort that determines tellability, not the trauma affected individual’s ability to narrate lived experience. Yeo’s research suggests that listener comfort is the main determiner of whether trauma narratives are or are not socially appropriate to tell. Specifically important is that when a trauma narrative does not fit in socially determined criteria, the expressive trauma communication of survivors is silenced because it is “too negative to be heard” (Yeo, 79). The scale of tellability also illustrates

that trauma narratives are judged worthy or unworthy based on the overall positive or negative feeling within the listener. In desiring easily digestible, positive trauma tropes, the focus is again on the comfort of the listener and not on the ability of the trauma survivor to recall or narrate lived experience, nor is it on the desire to learn from a shared conversation. The next section will discuss how the tellability of trauma can be seen differently in fiction and nonfiction accounts of trauma.

Positive trauma tropes exist to commodify the consumption of trauma, resulting in the focus on positivity and turning survivors into “creatures from another planet” (High 161). Survivor Abe Kimmelman turned down the opportunity to be interviewed as part of a study on “resilienc[y]—trauma’s happy flipside” calling the project “only beneficial to those who need a patronizing approach to the issue” (High 161). Removing pain from the experience and emphasizing or inventing positive results of the trauma experience is one-way trauma is sanitized to make the trauma socially appropriate to tell. The urge to “glorify” survivors or “to conceive of them as special people who, having experienced ultimate evil and destruction, have found essential truths and meanings of life” (Danieli 30) not only dehumanizes survivors, but also robs the pain and grief of the experience, a pain and grief that is well-earned. Jean Amery perhaps put it best: “We did not become wiser in Auschwitz . . . we did not become better, more human, more humane, and more mature ethically. You do not observe dehumanized man committing his deeds and misdeeds without having all of your notions of inherent human dignity placed in doubt” (Amery 20). Just as Ruth Kluger described being held at “arm’s length,” and Kimmelman calls a focus on positivity “patronizing,” survivors of trauma often feel “no shortage of talk and speculation *about* them,” but not a “sustained talk *with* them” (161). In essence, survivors are never heard, but are instead “represent[ed] in discourse in which they have no speaking role”

(Maggio 422). Truly, allowing survivors of trauma to be “genuine partners in conversation continues to seem somehow strange, even uncanny” (161). Interest or willingness to hear Holocaust survivor testimony didn’t even surge in the U.S. until the 1970’s and then “once America showed interest... it was only in watered-down, sentimental stories that inevitably came with a happy ending” (*Wonder*, Rosen 36). The turning away from actual survivor testimony while embracing “kitsch sentimentality” illustrates the consumption of “sugar coated” (Cole xix) commodified depictions of trauma serving to create “fantasies of witnessing” (Rothe 51).

Being the spectacle in the fantasy of witnessing leads to the sense of being othered described by many Holocaust survivors, but is also described by soldiers returning from war because of the pedestal on which combat veterans are placed in American society. The hero worship or “mythology” of the combat veteran allows civilians to believe that war cannot be described, but “believing war is beyond words is an abrogation of responsibility—it lets civilians off the hook from trying to understand, and veterans off the hook from needing to explain” (Klay). The sanitation of the narrative experience can also make trauma narrative a commodity “set apart from the business of everyday living in a context that feels rarefied, distant and cold” in which survivors are interacted with “more as a symbol than as a fellow human being” (High 162). Not only are positive tropes unhelpful, survivors who pretend positive overtones in trauma disclosure experience more severe trauma symptoms months later (Bonanna). Specifically in the case of childhood sexual assault, “survivors who expressed positive emotion in the context of describing a past childhood sexual assault had poorer long-term social adjustment,” highlighting the problem with conforming trauma disclosure to social desires for trauma positivity (Bonanno 824).

Self-preservation leads the survivors of many traumas to remain silent about those traumas when outside of their survivor community. In “Conducting Fieldwork in Rwanda” author Anne Kubai explains that community members were silent about their experiences in the Rwandan genocide until she was accepted as both safe and an insider in the community (Kubai). Trauma survivors speak, but tend to reserve that speech for safe people and community insiders where negative social reactions are less likely. This is an important distinction. Just because some survivors choose not to share does not mean that they are incapable of sharing. This is illustrated in Caruth’s own research, specifically with the story of a teen whose friend was killed by gun violence. The teen continued, in private, to have conversations with his dead friend. He did not lack memory or speech, but only reserved his memory and speech for the safe, though deceased, friend. Speaking directly to the dead is not atypical. Research has found that many people, in the wake of traumatic loss, continue emailing the dead (Gibson 339). They speak the trauma of their loss, but in a private and safe environment, which is true of survivors across contexts, “whatever wider silence or indifference, there was never silence among survivors themselves” (Greenspan 211).

The negative social reaction to trauma is not without consequences for survivors of trauma who can experience either positive or negative effects depending on the social reaction: “Sociological impacts of assault influence the development of PTSD through victim-blaming attitudes and the perpetuation of rape myths” (Chivers-Wilson, 111). For sexual assault specifically, “negative social reactions to sexual assault disclosures were significantly associated with negative mental health outcomes across race” (Hakimi 270). For survivors willing to make a first disclosure negative reactions not only hampered future disclosure, but in some cases, “could lead to further self-harm including suicidal thoughts and behaviors” (Park 115). Many

survivors are “advised with good intentions not to discuss [trauma experiences] in detail” (Amery 16), however “verbalizing thoughts, feelings, and images into language has been conceptualized by many to be the core component in recovering from traumatic events” (Konig 176).

The stigma against spoken trauma is ingrained in societal and cultural norms, deciding what people and subjects are “worthy to speak and be heard” (hooks 176). The existence of a stigma, specifically in trauma “depends on discourses that explicitly promote difference and implicitly contain hierarchies of value” (Goldstein 121). Trauma survivors and their narratives currently exist on the lower end of social value, and thus of social tellability. Beyond silencing trauma survivors it also stops many from seeking help when their experiences are outside of the accepted social discourse, stopping many with mental health issues from seeking help. Because suicidality falls on the low end of social tellability, it exacerbates the fact that “distressed youth often do not feel listened to, which deters them from disclosing their troubles or receiving the appropriate help or support” (Yeo 1). Instead, suicidal teens visit private, anonymous internet chat groups to speak their memories of trauma, and also feelings of depression and mental health crisis, with or without trauma attached. Public scorn compels these teens to seek such anonymous venues to avoid the stigma. Behind the veil of anonymity, teens were more likely to share traumatic experience anonymously, illustrating that, in safe situations, survivors were readily able to speak their memories with full pain attached. Socially imposed silence “may contribute to the invisibility and marginalization of one’s suffering especially when it is consciously adopted to fulfil cultural expectations” (Yeo 3).

Because of marginalization inherent in trauma survival, writing provides, for survivors, a crucial component to testimony because, it “bec[omes] a space through which the traumatic

experiences c[an] be articulated and, to a degree, managed. Sheets of paper ‘listen’” (Char 15). This writing of trauma narrative in the absence of verbal listeners was also illustrated in the actions of Holocaust survivors who provided “[a]bout 20,000 testimonies, mostly in writing...between 1945 and 1950” (Greenspan 208). Even in writing, survivors found resistance because “some stories are not as acceptable as others and they remain excluded from broader exposure through publication, particularly if the evident pain is too raw and personal, and the suffering too apparent” (Gair 51). When, based on the nature of raw suffering, those writers had difficulty finding an audience, “[t]he flood of testimonies dried up . . . once survivors realized that no one was interested in them” (Greenspan 208). This reticence to enter into the conversation goes beyond the public sphere and into academia. A comprehensive work on the writings of the *sonderkommando* was published in German in 2005 and has yet to be translated into English, “indicat[ing] the reluctance there has been, especially in anglophone scholarship, to probe further into these crucial questions” (Chare 9).

It is perhaps easy to see why trauma survivors seem to guard their experiences in a way that leads to the mistaken belief that trauma is unremembered or unspoken. Avoiding the consequences of social shaming, survivors often find alternatives to publicly claiming their traumas. This reflects, not an inability to remember or speak, but rather self-preservation. This is particularly interesting considering the differing depictions of trauma in nonfiction and fiction. Where many survivors cite the desire to witness or testify as their driving force behind writing, fictional trauma accounts do not share this desire. Instead, in order to maximize audience engagement, fiction writers are more apt to look away from the trauma, or even, like in *Light in August*, write characters who lack a formed memory of the trauma.

Even with Christmas' memory issues in *Light in August*, the book seems to answer, for Faulkner, Caruth's important question, "Is the trauma the encounter with death or the ongoing experience having survived it?" (*Unclaimed*, Caruth 7). A large aspect of this question, and one that begs consideration, is whether the social shame attached to trauma survival is what makes survival unbearable in a way that makes the survival of trauma a trauma in itself. Faced with the societal othering, silencing and many times outright mocking, I would argue that trauma is not "the apparent struggle to die" (*Unclaimed*, Caruth 65) but rather the struggle to survive in a world in which survivors are immediately and forever "othered" by the mere fact of their having survived in the first place. Society often demands that survivor lived experience be kept "private" and outside of discourse. Studies into the subject have often ignored survivor testimony and experience which evidences the survivor's ability to recall and recount lived experience.

It is our imperative to not add to the silencing of victims because "as long as the silence is maintained, human rights atrocities continue to go unchallenged. Very often bearing witness to these horrific events can break the silence and restore people's capacity to go on with their lives" (Blackburn 99). It's important to understand that trauma survivors are real people who existed in their own lives before trauma. A willingness to hear their testimony is in a way making room for them to exist as fully endowed humans outside of their victimization status. When we do not hear survivor testimony "we are not invited to feel compassion, and we are not encouraged to give refuge" (98) which has the effect of "maintaining the conspiracy of silence and the stories continue to be unspoken" (Blackburn 99). Ignoring the silencing of trauma does not allow a society to "acknowledge our complicity in the muting" (Spivak, *Critique* 309).

Even Freud avoided the discussion about "the most extreme possibility of suffering" saying "[i]t seems to me unprofitable to pursue this aspect of the problem any further" (*Pleasure*

Freud 89). Freud, like many other everyday listeners, turned away. He possibly projected his own discomfort into the hypothetical survivor's inability to speak or remember. Though Freud himself is not part of CTT, much of his research provides the theoretical underpinnings of CTT. Because of the listener's inherent desire to turn away, researchers must be aware that "an ideology may form that works against restoring the full agency of [survivors]" (McKinney 265). I would argue that it already has in the continued claims that survivors can neither speak nor remember, nor, in many cases, exercise moral agency. The problem is not the survivor's ability to speak but society's ability to listen. The power of societal listening, or ignoring, cannot be overemphasized. According to Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, "it must be emphasized that the victim suffered more . . . profoundly from the indifference of the onlookers than from the brutality of the executioner" (Wiesel 138).

Chapter IV

IV. Literary Comparison of *Survival in Auschwitz* and *Light in August*

4.1 Freudian Faulkner and Traumatic Realism/Testimonio

As the preceding chapters have demonstrated, there is a marked difference between the social idea of trauma which is fed by Freudian based Critical Trauma Theory, in which trauma leaves survivors without memory, agency and voice, and the actual experience of trauma, in which survivors cling to all three. This difference is evident when fiction based on Freudian psychoanalysis is compared against the particular nonfiction style proposed by Michael Rothberg as traumatic realism and by John Beverley as testimonio. Both wrestling with similar themes of trauma experience and survival against a backdrop of political and social acquiescence to racial and ethnic oppression and segregation, the Freudian-based *Light in August* by William Faulkner and the traumatic realist testimonio *Survival in Auschwitz* by Primo Levi offer parallel themes which are useful for critical comparison.

The background of each books also lends itself well to comparison. *Survival in Auschwitz* details Italian chemist Primo Levi's experience at Auschwitz death camp during World War II. His narrative takes readers through Levi's capture while working with an ill-prepared resistance group, then his experience in death camps and his ultimate survival. He details the ghettos, cattle trains to the death camp, selections, gas chambers, slave labor as well as the end of the war and working to keep his fellow survivors alive while waiting for rescue. Of his narrative, Levi says "none of these facts are invented" (10). Levi's purpose is to offer a witness, a testimony. He wrote "struggling to explain to others, and to myself, the events I had been involved in" though he claims "no definite literary intention" (181). In fact, several times in interviews Levi mentioned that the urge to write was so compelling that he could not stop writing. In the opening

poem, Levi “commend[s] these words” to the reader and asks the audience to “carve them in your hearts...repeat them to your children” (11). Because it is a memoir, Levi uses a single narrative voice and focuses on accuracy and testimony.

On the other hand, *Light in August* follows the biracial Joe Christmas from his abandonment at an orphanage for white children, where he is mocked by the children and called racial slurs, through his adoption by an abusive foster father and subservient foster mother. Christmas’ childhood traumas prophesy of his future violence. Christmas metes his trauma out to the women who are close to him, as well as the men who won’t fight back. He eventually murders his lover when her demands echo the demands made of his foster father during his childhood abuse. Christmas struggles with his racial identity throughout the novel, until at last that racial identity is publicly known and Christmas is shot to death and then castrated. Unlike Levi, Faulkner had definite literary intentions in that he wrote for publication in a way that Levi was not sure of wanting to attain at the time of his writing. Faulkner sought to engage the topic of racial inequalities in the south. While a work of fiction, the social structures and attitudes he writes of, as well as the complex lives of the characters, are honest depictions of the suffering brought about through racism and inequality and is told through the perspectives of multiple characters.

Despite their differences, there are several important similarities between the texts which contribute to the utility of their literary comparison. First, both books are highly centered on racial tensions, segregation, and injustice born of prejudice. Both books also reject the trope of the super-human, sainted survivor. Both works were initially rejected by their audiences. *Survival in Auschwitz* was originally published in Italian in 1947 under the title *If This Is a Man*. The manuscript was rejected by several presses before being accepted by a small press. The first

printing sold only 1500 copies and of those sold, most were purchased in Levi's own hometown (Sands). Translation into English came about more than a decade later, and then only after a title change. Where the original title "encourage[ed] readers to think about what...makes a human being a human being" (Mariani 248) the change to *Survival in Auschwitz* was meant to immediately make readers aware of the "happy ending." On the other hand, Faulkner's *Light in August* was banned in Nazi Germany and then, after the end of the war, US forces banned the book in occupied Germany. *Light in August* and *Survival in Auschwitz* were both written in the same general time period, though *Light in August* is fifteen years older.

Further, because of a particular emphasis on the internal, both books allow the reader to infer the protagonist's attitudes and experience. *Survival in Auschwitz* is a memoir and so the audience already has some degree of Levi's shared thoughts. Although *Light in August* is a work of fiction, because of the modernist focus on the liminality or internality of characters, the reader is able to see, not just Christmas' actions, but also his thoughts and intents (or lack thereof) associated with those actions. Beyond agency, memory and voice, the books share a similar focus on the importance of identity. Joe Christmas does not know his own identity. It is robbed from him, but Christmas still fights to reclaim, or to claim, some of his own identity, including being unwilling to go by his foster father's last name. Throughout *Survival in Auschwitz*, Levi claims his own identity and also the identity of those around him. There is never a "holocaust survivor" or a "a Greek person." Instead, whenever possible, Levi names the people around him, even, like 3-year-old Emilia, those people who don't show up in the narrative again because they've been killed (Levi 20).

Although the texts have many similarities, they starkly contrast in the treatment of memory, agency and voice after trauma. In *Light in August*, trauma impairs Christmas' memory,

voice and agency. He cannot remember his traumas, cannot voice them, and those same traumas that he can't remember or voice control Christmas' escalating violence throughout the work. Christmas is a puppet. This is in stark contrast to Levi's work which displays intact memory, agency and voice throughout the work. This is important, given that, because of the nature, severity and duration of Levi's multiple traumas, if trauma impaired memory, agency and voice, that impairment would likely be apparent in his work. Instead, Levi became a prolific author, publishing numerous books and articles about his experiences. The very existence of these writings, and the tens of thousands of other Holocaust narratives, severely undercuts the theory that memory, voice and agency do not survive trauma. Comparing Freudian psychoanalysis-based fictional accounts of the effects trauma on the individual to traumatic realism testimonios reveals, on the one hand, Caruth's unremembered trauma, and on the other, McNally's hyper-sensory trauma memory.

That Faulkner illustrates the Freudian unremembered trauma is not surprising. Faulkner derives much of his understanding of the personal, individual effects of trauma on the psychological ideas of his particular time and place, including the specific dominance of Sigmund Freud in the early 1900's. Freud was a world-renowned psychotherapist by 1920, more than a decade before Faulkner's *Light in August*. By that time, Freud had published so many books and articles in English that his "name was a veritable household word in the United States" (Fancher 1025). His popularity only grew, both because of the sponsorship of senior members of the American Psychological Association, and because his psychoanalytic theories were seen as accessible to lay people (1025). Because of this popularity, "in October of 1924 he made his first appearance on the cover of *Time* magazine" (1026). There would be three such appearances in Freud's lifetime. By 1926, Freud was mentioned in a popular song written by

Franklin Pierce Adams (1026). Though his theories were hotly contested by the medical community at the time, not to mention the debates that have continued to the present day, Freud had nonetheless been accepted, and well-known, by lay people well before *Light in August*'s publication.

William Faulkner was not without a knowledge and understanding of Freudian psychoanalytic theories, although Faulkner himself claimed otherwise. He even asserted that “[e]veryone talked of Freud when I lived in New Orleans, but I never read him” (qtd in Fowler 411). However, Faulkner’s biographer, Joseph Blotner, notes that Faulkner would have heard “a great deal of talk about...Freud” (Blotner qtd. in Kartiganer 149). Faulkner’s claim that he did not read or have an understanding of Freud has been met with skepticism, with many critics positing that Faulkner resisted public disclosure of Freudian influence to protect his work against accusations of being derivative (Fowler 411). However, “countless critics have demonstrated, the texts of [Faulkner’s] novels reveal a persistent, even obsessive, engagement with Freudian motifs” (Fowler 412). More, Faulkner’s own veracity can be legitimately called into question as he also “told his publisher he owned no books at all” and “pretended to be a country bumpkin” denying having “read Joyce, Freud, or any other contemporary whose work seemed to have influenced his own” (Bockting 280). Of Faulkner’s work “critics since Thomas McHaney have noted [his work] is obviously indebted to Freud” (Sykes 517). In fact, across the breadth of his works, scholars have consistently noted the “insistently Freudian content and Oedipal structure of Faulkner’s novels” (Castille 112). Scholar John D. Sykes calls this “Faulkner’s artistic appropriation of Freud” which created in his novels the “Psychological Faulkner” (513).

Freudian influence is especially potent in *Light in August*, which “is almost textbook Freud in its representation of a primal scene—Joe’s childhood presence in the dietician’s closet

during a sexual encounter—and how this primal moment affects Joe’s subsequent sexual orientation” (Duvall 263). Not only does Faulkner’s work betray a Freudian influence, *Light in August* specifically parallels Freud’s published accounts of “The Wolf Man,” first published in English in 1925. As a child, the Wolf Man mistakenly witnessed “a sexual act between his mother and father” and that witnessing negatively alters the course of the Wolf Man’s life (Polk 54). Noel Polk argues that Freud’s description of the Wolf Man’s childhood becomes “the crucial event to which Faulkner returns, more or less explicitly, over and over again” (54). For Freud “the Oedipus complex is central” (54). With only a basic understanding of *Light in August*’s plot, the Oedipal complex is palpable. Scholars see that this Oedipus complex “is no less central to central to Faulkner’s work” (54). Delineating the many ways that Joe Christmas mirrors Freud’s Wolf Man, Polk argues that “the Joe Christmas portions of *Light in August* are...a virtually programmatic inscription of Freud into the novel” (84).

Freudian based trauma depictions are problematic, and not only because “consistent critiques that have weakened the theory from the start” (Visser 131), but also because Freudian based trauma portrayal in literature puts particular emphasis on a white, Eurocentric experience that focuses attention on weakness and not strength. In this way, the hypothetical destructive nature of trauma to memory, agency and voice take central stage. It is on these destructions that Freud, and Critical Trauma Theory, places focus, which is clearly visible in *Light in August*.

According to Caruth, “trauma is a weakening disorder” (Visser 131). Faulkner’s protagonist, Joe Christmas, is certainly weakened by trauma, mentally, emotionally and morally. Comparing cultural conceptions of trauma to memory, Silke Arnold de Simine explains that “[w]hile memory is potentially granted an identity building redemptive and therapeutic power, this is denied in trauma whose impact is seen to shatter all representational capacities, leaving

only a flood of terrifying affect and disrupting an individuals' coherent sense of self" (Simine 141). However, the shattering nature of trauma is a Western depiction. Other cultures "reject victimization and instead embrace survival as the main defining characteristic of trauma (Visser 138). In the area of non-Western literatures "critics and theorists... today concur that many of the claims of early trauma theory are untenable" (Visser 127). In fact, "[p]sychological research on trauma, particularly in recent years, confirms that many trauma-related syndromes are culture-bound" (Visser 127). This explains why "[e]ither by ignoring non-Western experiences or by taking Western modernity as a universal norm, these built-in limitations and biases limit the ability of trauma theory to offer an effective cross cultural ethical engagement that has global relevance" (Kurtz 9).

The focus on Eurocentric views of trauma has been injurious to literary trauma studies. Michael Rothberg argues that "as long as trauma studies forgoes comparative study and remains tied to a narrow Eurocentric framework, it distorts the histories it addresses and threatens to reproduce the very Eurocentrism that lies behind those histories" (Rothberg qtd. in Kurtz 9). Far from being representative of survivors, tropes of debilitating personal silence in which survivors are incapable of trauma communication, tends to be inaccurate of many survivor's experiences. When not represented by forms that are more accurate of individual traumatic processes, readers can derive the "false sense that true knowledge has been achieved" (Pederson "Trauma and Narrative" 198). That is problematic in that "if literature is a particular form by means of which objective reality is reflected, then it becomes of crucial importance for it to grasp that reality as it truly is" (Lukacs qtd in Rothberg 110).

Faulkner was influenced not only by Freud, but also the tenants of modernism which coalesce to create an unremembered, unspoken trauma. According to J. Roger Kurtz, "Modernist

texts played a critical role in developing the concept of trauma portrayal in literature” (Kurtz 2). Interestingly, ideological differences in the portrayal of trauma specifically between modernism writers T.S. Eliot and D.H. Lawrence led to the development of animosity between the two. For Eliot, the answer to trauma communication was silence as he “transformed his numbness towards the incommunicable suffering of the war into an aesthetic impersonality crucial to the Modernist style” (Krockel 198). While Eliot embraced aesthetics, including silences that allowed him to “present himself as the figure who survived the war intact” (Krockel 198). Lawrence gravitated towards realism and “repeatedly exposed his wounds” (Krockel 198). In the postwar period, Lawrence lost the following he had accumulated pre-war. Eliot criticized Lawrence publicly and “advocated a process which both commemorated and resurrected the dead, but which also denied their memory through its ambiguous imagery” (198). While Lawrence publicly owned trauma and pain, for Eliot, “silence offered an ambivalent form of atonement” (Krockel 206).

Modernism places particular preference on narrative techniques in which trauma often happens off stage. However, “[p]reference for these narrative techniques is Eurocentric and privileges a psychological understanding of trauma that is decidedly Western” (Craps qtd. in Kurtz 107). Pederson argues that the focus on modernist technique “suggests that trauma cannot be grasped through conventional realistic forms of narration and that we have to resort to modernist strategies of representation in the attempt to imaginatively work through and transform psychic trauma (Roth 2012, 94). The crossroads of Freud and modernism privilege silence in trauma. However, given the popularity of Freud and rise of psychoanalytics, “these concepts continue to determine how we speak about trauma today” (Kurtz 3).

Faulkner’s Freudian influence illustrates CTT operating in a closed loop in which literature was influenced by Freud and in those literary works we see examples of Freudian

trauma. Thus, Freud influenced heavily the same literature used to showcase the correctness of Freudian theories of trauma. However, works from outside this closed look illuminate a very different experience of trauma, including other aspects of Faulkner's own work. In fact, when the Freudian layers of personal trauma are peeled back from the text, *Light in August* reveals a deep and rich underscore of community and generational trauma which is more apt than the Freudian overlay of personal unremembering.

It is perhaps because of the discrepancies that can occur when fiction is modeled after the particular and changing ideas of a culture and time that Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel, who went on to a prolific speaking and writing career, argues that fiction writers are incapable of encapsulating trauma they did not themselves experience. Wiesel says of writers of fictional Holocaust novels, "Auschwitz...submits only to memory. It can be communicated by testimony, not by fiction. A novel on Majdanek is either not a novel or not about Majdanek. Between the dead and the rest of us there exists an abyss that no talent can bridge" (Wiesel, *Against* 126). It is exactly this abyss "between everyday reality and real extremity" that traumatic realism seeks to "preserve and even expose" (Rothberg 139). Wiesel is not the only academic who eschews fiction for non-fictional representations of trauma. Michael Rothberg, a scholar of comparative literature and Holocaust studies, argues for a specific genre of nonfiction which he calls "traumatic realism" which is a "form of documentation and historical cognition attuned to the demands of extremity" (Rothberg 14). Like Rothberg, Wiesel argues that "since the event itself is testimony, it must be communicated in its purest form" (Wiesel, *Against* 78). Rothberg argues for the acknowledgement of traumatic realism as its own genre when as he sees "[t]he need for new forms of representation capable of registering the traumatic shock of modern genocide and for new forms of publicity that will translate knowledge of extremity for a mass audience"

(Rothberg 58). John Beverley argues for something similar, what he calls “Testimonio” when he asks “[a]re there experiences in the world today that would be betrayed or misrepresented by the forms of literature as we know it?” (Beverley 29). Highlighting the silence that can occur in arguments that survivors can neither remember nor speak, both testimonio and traumatic realism “refuse to accept the postmodern version of the bystander’s lament whereby ‘we didn’t know’ is transformed into ‘we can’t know’” (Rothberg 140).

Of traumatic realism and testimonio, Rothberg and Beverley argue that a new way of conceptualizing trauma writing became necessary after the genocide of World War II, where trauma was so severe that it “exceed[ed] the frameworks of both classical realism and the poststructuralist critique of representation” (Rothberg 100). Further, the difficulty of narrating such extreme trauma arises from the fact that the writer and the reader “lack...shared meaning” (Rothberg 106). However, “[i]t is precisely the confrontation with a lack of shared meaning between narrator and reader that characterize[s]” traumatic realism (114). Testimonio and traumatic realism then both embrace the idea that testimony is the only form “adequate to that situation because it refuses both to supply a redemptive ending and to give up on attempts to communicate the extreme” (Rothberg 155). Traumatic realism seeks to bring the reader “closer to the events and, through the use of commentary, discourages the facile embrace of closure” (Rothberg 106). By bringing the reader closer to the event without giving closure “traumatic realism produces knowledge, but not consolation” (156). The lack of consolation is purposeful, as works of traumatic realism seek more than anything to change the reader, and perhaps the culture within which the reader exists, thus, testimonio and traumatic realism “always signif[y] the need for a general social change in which the stability of the reader’s world must be brought into question” (Beverley 41). Far from “reflect[ing] the traumatic event mimetically,” traumatic

realism and testimonio instead attempt to “*produce* [the traumatic event] as an object of knowledge and to *transform* its readers so that they are forced to acknowledge their relationship to posttraumatic culture” (Rothberg 140, italics in original). It is the relationship between the reader and the events at hand that traumatic realism and testimonio bridge, rejecting efforts to “build verbal fences.” Noting that language can often be used to build fences instead of bridges, Lawrence Langer offers this criticism:

When we speak of the survivor instead of the victim and of martyrdom instead of murder, regard being gassed as a pattern for dying with dignity, or evoke the redemptive rather than the grievous power of memory, we draw on an arsenal of words that urges us to build verbal fences between the atrocities of the camp and ghettos and what we are mentally willing—or able—to face. (Langer qtd. in Rothberg 121).

Ruth Kluger criticizes these verbal fences by noting the “separation between then and now, us and them...doesn’t serve truth, but rather laziness” (Kluger qtd. in Rothberg 131).

Traumatic realism brings to the table “a commitment to documentation and realistic discourse [that] has come to hold an almost sacred position in confrontations with genocide” (Rothberg 99). The realistic nature is meant to feed realistic discourse. Beverley explains that “what is important about testimonio is that it produces, if not the real, then certainly a sensation of experiencing the real that has determinate effects on the reader that are different from those produced by even the most realist...fiction” (Beverley 40). The sensation of experience is vital in testimonio as the desired outcome is change, both personally for the reader and also to social structures that support injustice. Testimonio and traumatic realism both embrace the crucial element of teaching that is the focal point of providing witness to traumatic events. Both seek to “construct access to a previously unknowable object and to instruct an audience in how to

approach that object, the stakes of traumatic realism are at once epistemological and pedagogical, or, in other words, political” (140). Commenting on the political nature of any piece of writing, but specifically engaging in the questioned ability of nonfiction or fiction to portray trauma, John Beverley notes that the question is “not a difference between ‘solidarity’ and ‘objectivity,’ but rather between two equally political—that is, equally ideological—positions, both of which are founded on a claim of truth (5). The question of whether fiction can elucidate egregious trauma rests on this claim of truth. While Rothberg and Beverley are dubious, Wiesel is adamant in the negative.

However, because many audiences are ill-prepared to accept and understand egregious trauma, fictional literary accounts possibly become not only relevant, but also important. Memoir of heinous trauma survival must usually use other methods to ask for the audience’s participation and must specifically make the experience palatable. In the words of Elie Weisel, “to be believable, survivors’ tales had to tell less than the truth” (qtd in Druker). While “eyewitness experience...bears the authority of legal evidence” (114), there is specific and full value to fictional works that use “the power of poetry and art...to create story and character with such aesthetic power that people embrace these creations” (Hart 32). Even in rejecting fictional representations, Wiesel also acknowledges that he “believe[s] the purpose of literature is to correct injustice” (Wiesel *Against* V2 75). Writers of fiction, like Faulkner, “engage in a delicate balancing act by trying to lure readers into uncomfortable or alien material, sharing the victim’s pain with the readers, shifting between what can and cannot be revealed (Vickroy, *Contemporary* 3). Although not always based on personal trauma experience, fiction of trauma “raise[s] important questions and responsibilities associated with the writing and reading of trauma as they position their readers in ethical dilemmas analogous to those of trauma survivors” (Vickroy,

Contemporary 1). Moreover, even the most honest trauma narratives “retain intrusive literary conventions” (5) Lawrence Langer argues that “[t]his voice seeks to impose on apparently chaotic episodes a perceived sequence, *whether or not that sequence was perceived in an identical way* during the period that is being rescued from oblivion by memory and language” (41, italics in original). Imposing sequence with language is, in itself, a literary device, such that even traumatic realism must at points embrace form over memory. In short, despite the fictional nature of *Light in August*, both Levi and Faulkner rest on a “claim of truth” (Beverley 5).

While “unlike the novel, testimonio promises by definition to be primarily concerned with sincerity rather than literariness” (Beverley 32) the literariness of a work of fiction does not per se completely negate its own sincerity especially as “[t]rauma and narrative are tightly bound” (Pederson, “Trauma and Narrative” 97). Faulkner is a form of truth, one that specifically engages popular ideas of trauma as something unimaginable, without words, happening off stage or on the periphery, but not as the fully known, focus of someone’s life. It is possible that the truth of personal trauma survival that Faulkner reveals is not the “objective qualities of the subject matter, [but] the product of its apprehension” (Mandel 100). Thus memoir, and even traumatic realism, is not more intrinsically truthful than a work of fiction. The traumatic realism of *Survival in Auschwitz* can reveal the bodily experience of trauma in line with Richard McNally, and because of the specific Freudian influence of *Light in August*, the text reveals a certain understanding of trauma’s operations on the individual’s brain which mesh with Caruth’s Critical Trauma Theory.

There is a caveat to this. Although Joe Christmas as a character is specifically focused on the self, Faulkner as author focuses not only on Joe Christmas’ personal trauma, but also on the traumatic past of the entire community. Faulkner’s trauma focus is twofold; first, the individual

brain in trauma, and second, the trauma of an entire community. While Faulkner's individual in trauma parallels both Caruth and Freud in portraying a lack of memory, agency and voice, Faulkner's community in trauma, interestingly, parallels not Caruth or Freud, but McNally.

Faulkner's focus on conveying the trauma of the entire community reveals that "collective injuries are related to the collective character of America" (Hussein 123). Where Faulkner relies on his own experience for the effects of trauma on systems and communities, and not on Freudian theory, the novel captures, collectively, community trauma that is not forgotten for generations and that is regularly spoken by that community. This creates in the novel a kind of irony—Joe Christmas cannot remember his personal trauma, and yet the entire community remembers generational infighting, trauma and loss. Faulkner creates a community where people remember several generations of grief. By capturing a wider focus of the generational and communal trauma, even of side characters, which is something that nonfiction narrative would be hard pressed to accomplish, "Faulkner show[s] us that cultural values can be debilitating to individuals as those values are processed through families and communities" (Vickroy 181). In assuming Faulkner's fiction is unable to do justice to trauma, we ignore the possibility that Faulkner has experience with another mode of trauma—that of the community. Even in fiction, there is truth. Masterfully discussing the collective and generational nature of trauma, Faulkner clarifies to the reader that "trauma is not only to be understood as an individual, psychological, and/or physical response, but also as a collective, political, and cultural condition with far-reaching material and immaterial dimensions" (Visser 126). Faulkner "pinpoint[s] the abuses of power" that create personal and collective trauma while also "bring[ing] to the surface social evasions of the psychological consequences of objectifying individuals" (Vickroy 179). Because Faulkner puts so much emphasis on the ancestry of the characters, and the trauma connected to

that ancestry, Faulkner is “able to re-create the lived experience and atmospheres surrounding the linkage of individual traumas with social oppression” (Vickroy 180).

Far from being unable to recreate trauma in fiction, Faulkner’s particular brand of fiction “seems able to suggest connections between individual wounding and broader cultural pathologies that would be more difficult to see without the psychological and experiential framework of [fictional] narrative” (Vickroy 180). Thus, even though the reader sees personal silence and unremembering connected to the personal trauma, there is still a remembering, speaking, choosing testimony of trauma within the text. In *Light in August* we clearly see that “[f]ear drives those who traumatize others so as to dominate them, and fear leads the aggressors to instill more fear in the traumatized so they will not challenge established power and norms” (Vickroy 180). Although not testimony or written specifically to witness, fictional trauma literature like Faulkner’s “can shed light on human endurance of the painful dilemmas we face in our culture, past and present” (Vickroy 180). Further, because of fiction’s focus on keeping violence off stage, fiction can invite the trauma uninitiated into a situation they might otherwise be hesitant to encounter. In creating safety for the reader “[t]rauma fiction may also supplement historical knowledge by rendering historical experience through characters’ consciousness and behaviors, highlighting relationships between individuals, their societies, and times” (Vickroy 181). In pulling together the collective, the personal, and the generational, Faulkner “underscore[s] the key role of trauma in questioning and understanding profound issues of human suffering and inequality” (Vickroy 184). In *Light in August* “story and argument overlap” (Hart 29).

4.2 *Comparison of the Effects of Individual Trauma in Light in August and Survival in Auschwitz*

Survival in Auschwitz showcases Levi's memory of trauma. Levi describes in detail the Jewish ghetto, the train transport, changing vehicles, names and faces, even distinct scents and specific guards. Of the sign above the door on his first day in Auschwitz Levi writes "its memory still strikes me in my dreams" (22). This remarkable clarity of memory lasts beyond the first days in Auschwitz. Throughout the narrative, Levi remembers camp rules (34) the location of the exact infirmary he visits (46) and his living situation which he accounts in great depth and detail, noting which prisoner block is responsible for which duties, showing that Levi's memory has retained even extraneous detail (32).

Far from being unremembered, Levi's recollections are so vivid to him that he often slips from past tense into present tense as he writes, as if he is vividly reliving the moment. In the opening paragraph of chapter two, Levi begins in past tense, "the lorry stopped...we saw a large door" (22). However, at the start of the very next paragraph, Levi slips into present perfect "[w]e climb down...they make us enter," and later "we have a terrible thirst" (22). Later in the same chapter Levi is back to writing in past tense, but then changes again (26). In one sentence he uses "bell rang" "hurried off" and "left us stunned," clearly in the past tense. In the very next sentence, Levi shifts back to present tense "some feel refreshed but I do not" (26). Levi's memory of the event is so fresh and the intensity so great that it is difficult for him to remain in the past tense as he describes the experiences. At one point, Levi changes tenses within the same sentence. Speaking of the imprisoned Jewish dentist who came to speak with the new prisoners on the first day in the camp, Levi starts the sentence "I still think that even this dentist" and ends the sentence "I do not want to believe a word" (26). While it is possible that Levi's changes in

tense reflects untrained writing, or errors in translation, these changes in tense occur throughout Levi's work whenever a memory is particularly difficult.

Slipping into present tense is not unusual for trauma survivors recounting their experiences because the memories are so vivid and detailed. Moreover, slipping into present tense is not indicative of unhealed trauma. In fact, research conducted on tense shifts in narrative trauma found that "writing that had a greater percentage of word use focused on Present tense was positively correlated with Cognitive Processes, Insight, Affective Processes . . . as well as Positive Emotion" (Badger 587). Changing into present tense to narrate the trauma experience was found to be a positive factor for trauma survivors, not evidence of deficiency or lapse.

The comparatively less severe moments of his capture aren't the only memories Levi retains, instead Levi retains the memory of even the most horrific experiences. He recalls the space of time the crematorium at Birkenau ran. Noting the increased murder near the end of the war he writes that "the crematorium chimney has been smoking for ten days" (126), showing a recollection of time period in a vivid memory that causes him to slip back into present tense. Levi even recalls those moments which, because of self-judgement or social shame, he might most want to forget. Near the end of his time at Auschwitz, Levi walks in a selection line just in front of a much younger and healthier prisoner. The youth, Rene, is mistakenly chosen for selection when, Levi assumes, the SS guard wrote the number of the wrong prisoner. Levi does "not know what I will think tomorrow and later; today I feel no distinct emotion" (128). Sitting in a room where half of the occupants have been selected to die in the gas chamber, Levi has particular memory of Rene and also of Sattler who "stands in a corner mending a shirt" not understanding that he has been chosen to die (128). Levi remembers the French soldiers killed

“methodically, with a shot in the nape of the neck, lining up their twisted bodies in the snow on the road” (166) and later, “the pile of corpses in front of our window” (169).

In his narrative, Levi recalls in detail the moments of greatest trauma as well as more rote information like the positions of places and objects. These traumas are not absent or hidden from his memory, but instead “crowd my memory” (90). He even considers whether his violent memories have value or worth, or should be shared at all, before considering whether they should be remembered in the first place:

We can perhaps ask ourselves if it is necessary or good to retain any memory of this exceptional human state. To this question we feel that we have to reply in the affirmative. We are in fact convinced that no human experience is without meaning or unworthy of analysis, and that fundamental values, even if they are not positive, can be deduced from this particular world which we are describing. (87)

Throughout Levi’s account, we see vivid, detailed memory. Nothing escapes Levi’s attention or remembrance, instead, his memory is enhanced, even in those instances he chooses not to disclose, and there are moments Levi pointedly chooses not to disclose. Of the moment families were loaded on to cattle cars for transport to death camps, Levi writes “[m]any things were then said and done among us; but of these it is better that there remain no memory” (16). These instances show, not an absence of memory, but instead a claiming of agency, a setting of boundary. He has both the memory and the ability to relate the experience, which is showcased throughout the narrative, but specifically chooses to protect the privacy and intimacy of these particular moments. The importance is this: we are not entitled to the stories of survivors. Claiming that if a survivor does not speak it is because of some physical or mental inability diminishes the agency of survivors and illuminates a particular type of entitlement—entitlement

to someone else's intimate stories. Eghosa Osaghae, a professor of comparative politics in Nigeria, calls sees entitlement even in trauma research that "continues to be dominated by foreign scholars who mostly import and employ Western unilinear paradigms" (Osaghae 15).

This entitlement hearkens back to Anne Kubai's experiences after the Rwandan genocide. She writes that, initially, survivors were unwilling to share their experiences, leading other researchers to determine that the survivors had no memory when, in reality, "Rwandans at the time were not keen to include [trauma memories] in public discourse" (Kubai 113) illustrating the difference between "official discourse of memory and history . . . [and] the private, intimate conversations of people who trust each other" where "access is . . . restricted" (Buckley-Zistel 134). However, once Kubai became a member of the community and an insider, survivors narrated their experiences willingly and well. Assuming a right to survivor testimony to the point where, when that testimony is not offered, one believes the survivor must not have access to voice is evidence of that entitlement.

Although Levi purposefully holds back some memories, Levi describes his trauma memory as "unbelievably detailed" (180). While his trauma memory is not impaired, his memory of the normal life he led before the war is much less distinct. In Auschwitz, the prisoners found they "preserved the memories of our previous life, but blurred and remote, profoundly sweet and sad, like the memories of early infancy" (116). The blurred memories he describes are not the moments of trauma, but the moments of comfort. In fact, Levi states that he experiences his non-trauma life are "black and white" and the memories of his death camp experiences are in "full technicolor" (182).

While Levi's memory of actual trauma is in technicolor, Joe Christmas' fictional trauma memory is not. This is not because Faulkner does not address trauma memory. Indeed, he points

to memory as the starting point of several chapters, writing “memory believes before it remembers” (141) and later “memory knowing, knowing beginning to remember” (144). Christmas’ memory, specifically of childhood trauma, if present at all, is heavily fragmented. Many memories only appear later and only immediately adjacent to a violent act. Much of his life is not “remember[ed] until later, when memory no longer accepted his face, accepted the surface of remembering” (144). Even without the trauma memory, these abuses color his life with a “foreknowledge of something now irrevocable, not to be recalled” (55). In connection with Christmas’ first major and prolonged beating at eight years old and at the hands of his stepfather, Faulkner writes, “He was just eight then. It was years later that memory knew what he was remembering” (155). In this scene, Christmas “knelt in the corner as he had not knelt on the rug, and above the outraged food kneeling, with his hands ate, like a savage, like a dog” (155).

This is the first age, eight years old, in the text in which Christmas is called savage. This savagery is revisited in the text, specifically when, later in life, his lover asks him to “kneel,” and she is savagely murdered. While eight years old is the first age at which Christmas is first described Christmas as savage, on his first introduction in the novel when Christmas is substantially older, he is also described as savage, and that descriptor is applied twenty-eight times in the text. Christmas is without memory, but the trauma that he does not remember, or only fleetingly remembers in fragments, colors his entire life and even seemingly unrelated choices.

At one point shortly after Christmas kills his foster father, he reaches for a memory he cannot find until finally we see his “memory clicking knowing” (230). In a way deeply contrasting Levi’s actual trauma experience, because of the absence of memory, Christmas is a slave to his unremembered trauma in a way that not only robs memory, but also agency.

Regarding impaired agency, in Levi's account of trauma survival, he makes what choices are available, fully cognizant of those choices. Even under the most severe restrictions of personal autonomy, Levi does not mindlessly perform his trauma. The same cannot be said of Christmas, whose past trauma binds him to his future trauma, specifically in the way he inflicts his own trauma on others and how the violence he inflicts seals his own destruction. Christmas' behavior fits with Freud's "compulsion to repeat" induced by trauma, but interestingly, Levi's does not (*Pleasure* 33).

Christmas' repetition compulsion robs agency as it is sacrificed to the trauma response, which doesn't hold true in Levi's experiences. Further, Levi isn't alone in claiming agency. He is not an outlier. Early in Levi's narrative, he writes of Jewish mothers with their children facing the impending deportation to Auschwitz in cattle trucks. These mothers "stayed up to prepare the food for the journey with tender care, and washed their children and packed the luggage...nor did they forget the diapers, the toys" (Levi 15). This group of people including young and old and families, surrounded by barbed wire, preparing to depart for death camps at dawn by rifle point and the mothers make one of the few choices available to them—to feed their children. After all, Levi writes "if you and your child were going to be killed tomorrow, would you not give him" food "to eat today?" (15). Even in the severest constriction of liberty, experiencing the impending destruction of themselves and their children, these women were not puppets to trauma. While agency is certainly challenged, it is also retained. Even later in the narrative with people who acted as they would not have acted in normal circumstances, the psychic scar of trauma created in them neither an immoral person nor someone inexorably controlled by their traumatic past, even when that trauma severely alters the course of that life. On the contrary, Levi and others fight to retain personal humanity which is illustrated when he says, "they will take away

our name: and if you want to keep it, we will have to find ourselves the strength to do so, to manage somehow so that behind the name something of us as we were, still remains” (27). Levi claims that it is “precisely because the Lager was a great machine to reduce us to beasts, we must not become beasts” (41). The claiming of agency here, the refusal to become the violence inflicted on them, the refusal to become the abuser, exemplifies the clinging to the “something of us as we were.” The violence and constraint creates the driving need to hold to agency, not the destruction of agency. Instead, Levi and others “are slaves, deprived of every right . . . but we still possess one power, and we must defend it with all our strength for it is the last—the power to refuse our consent” (41).

Levi and others refuse their consent in multiple ways throughout the narrative, including claiming a moment of solace in whatever place is available, no matter how socially unacceptable. Levi describes the latrine as “an oasis of peace” (68). He and others find in the latrine a bit of a sanctuary, claiming of a moment of peace wherever it can be found as an act of rebellion, and a claiming of individual humanity. Even in the most difficult of circumstances and even when choices are severely limited, Levi’s choosing of the latrine is still agency. He is still in charge of himself. He retains the “power to refuse . . . consent.”

Within Levi’s narrative, some are better at holding on to those pieces of themselves than others. Of his best friend Alberto, Levi writes “he himself did not become corrupt. I always saw, and still see in him, the rare figure of the strong yet peace-loving man against whom the weapons of the night are blunted” (57). Neither Levi nor Alberto have become monsters, their psyches are not twisted by trauma. Further, Levi and Alberto are not the only individuals in Levi’s narrative to retain their own humanity. He credits another man, Lorenzo, with his survival by:

having constantly reminded me by his presence, by his nature and plain manner of being good, that there still existed a just world outside our own, something and someone still pure and whole, not corrupt, not savage, extraneous to hatred and terror; something difficult to define, a remote possibility of good, but for which it was worth surviving . . . but Lorenzo was a man; his humanity was pure and uncontaminated, he was outside this world of negation. (121)

While fictional accounts of trauma show survivors incapable of avoiding becoming their abusers, Levi shows something very different—a retaining of agency even in severe trauma. That’s not to say that retaining agency necessarily means retaining a specific view of morality or being sainted by the experience of trauma, only that trauma as described by Levi does not irrevocably remove agency, and certainly does not doom a survivor to become the tormenter.

Some prisoners attempted survival by fawning to the demands of the SS guards. One prisoner, Henri, was able to survive by these means. He receives Levi’s censure. Levi writes that he “would give much to know of his life as a free man, but I do not want to see him again” (100). However, even with people like Henri “nobody is so sure of his own lot to be able to condemn others” (125). Throughout the narrative, Levi rejects the dehumanization that would come from putting trauma survivors on a pedestal, describing himself and his fellow prisoners as “a common sampling of humanity” (17). Henri does what he must to survive. The differentiation here is that these actions were taken for survival, not out of an irresistible drive to act out traumatic violence on others. In fact, much later Henri replied to Levi’s account of him and “bears witness to it” and “accept[s] Levi’s accusation as probably just” (Egan 97-98) before giving his own account and speaking of the family he was able to raise and the man he chose to become afterward. Even Henri refuses consent.

Levi himself refuses consent throughout his narrative, even while he also shares situations where he would have wanted better options. Levi often reaches forward with compassion, but in a way that refuses adoration or sainthood. Of Kraus, a “clumsy” boy who does not yet understand the harsh realities of camp life, Levi concocts a dream, struggling through a patchwork language he does not know to tell Kraus something that might give the young man some hope. The dream is a lie. It has the desired effect, Kraus’ spirits are lifted, but Levi ends the story pushing back against the objectification of the sainted by calling Kraus “poor” and “silly” (134). Even when he gives kindness, Levi is open about his negative thoughts and intentions. At the end of the war, sick with fever and starved, Levi feeds the other prisoners who are also ill, keeping them alive until rescue. Even with these heroic events, Levi remains only a man. Of the people he helped to save, Levi writes of the prayers and cries of the people who were so injured and ill they could not help themselves while calling for him “without my being able to do anything about it. I could have cursed them” (166). However, even as he admits his own frustration and anger. He and his two companions “were consciously and happily willing to work at last for a just and human goal, to save the lives of our sick comrades” (166). Immediately as Levi is released from the constraint of the SS guards, while still working for his own survival and still in the midst of his own trauma, he gives himself to that “just and human goal.” To the very last Levi clings to his humanity and his own agency. Primo Levi makes no claim on his own moral correctness in all cases. He rejects being categorized as a suffering saint or a pillar of morality. He is not forgiving, but he is still fully in control of his own agency and his own humanity.

In contrast, Joe Christmas does not cling to his humanity. Early on, Christmas is put on a collision course to become his abuser who was described as a “ruthless man who had never

known either pity or doubt” (152), words which, by the middle of the novel, could just as easily be applied to Christmas himself. Christmas’ trauma dictates his future choices such that “[h]e could see it like a printed sentence, full born and already dead (104). Faulkner “stage[s] the debate between inherited and environmental criminality” (Levay 17) questioning the ultimate agency of trauma survivors and firmly siding with criminality as inescapable.

While Levi clings to his own humanity, there is evidence in *Survival in Auschwitz* that Levi rejects the humanity of Nazi soldiers. In the language Levi uses to describe his captors, there is often a dehumanization, however, this language shows Levi’s own agency. He fully rejects in every possible way the inhuman treatment of the Jews by the Nazis in sharp contrast to Christmas who metes out the same violence of his childhood on others. Christmas doesn’t reject his abusers; he becomes them. He becomes them against his own will. Christmas’ will is completely swallowed up in the trauma in sharp contrast to Levi and his fellow victims who retain agency even when the choices available are severely limited.

Christmas spends the novel reenacting the violence which was inflicted on him, especially on people he perceives to be weaker. In one sexual relationship he “would waken her with his hard brutal hand and sometimes take her as hard and as brutally before she was good awake” (106). His intimacy is rape. Women aren’t his only victims. Although Brown is the only man with whom Christmas has a relationship, Christmas is still violent. In one scene he “raised Brown’s head and began to strike him with his flat hand, short, vicious, hard” then “put his hand flat upon Brown’s mouth and nose” suffocating him (103). These aggressions are almost always without provocation.

Even when Christmas is not harming another person or animal, he is still inflicting violence through the very movement of his body. The way that he moves in the world enacts

violence. When shoveling sawdust at the mill, Christmas is found “jabbing his shovel into the sawdust slowly and steadily and hard, as though he were chopping up a buried snake” (40). When opening a tin can, he doesn’t screw off the cap, instead he “laid the tins on their sides and with the sharp edge of the shovel he pierced them” (112). The violence infuses Christmas to such a degree those around him can also sense it in him “sullen and quiet as a snake” (45). Christmas carries with him “his own inescapable warning, like a flower its scent of a rattlesnake its rattle” (33). The trauma of Christmas’ past has permeated his entire being, has ruined him.

Even while Christmas’ violence is arguably endless, there is no connection between his internal desires and those actions. Christmas is not in control of his choices. Faulkner reveals Christmas’ thoughts. Christmas knows “[s]omething is going to happen to me. I am going to do something” (104). That line is repeated throughout the book: “I am going to do something. I am going to do something” as Christmas has premonitions of his own future violence, but no ability to stop it (276). He is a puppet. Violence happens without his consent. When Christmas kills McEachern, Christmas disappears from the scene entirely and is shown being “not aware of what he was saying or what was happening” (207). He describes the murder as “see[ing] himself as from a distance, like a man being sucked down into a bottomless morass” (260). Christmas’ has as much control of his actions as he would if they belonged to someone else altogether.

In his own head, Christmas speaks to himself gently revealing a degree of internality. The victim of actions he cannot control (105), Christmas reserves the few non-harsh words he speaks in the novel for himself. Through the glimpse of Christmas’ internal world, we see that “all [he] want[s] is peace” (112). This is mentioned multiple times inside Christmas’ head, “‘That’s all I wanted’ he thought. ‘Don’t seem like a whole lot to ask’ (115). This violence is not what he wants. He is acting in a way that is firmly against his will and against what he wants for his life

and that leads him to ask “what the hell is the matter with me” after he accosts a group of women, threatens them, and screams obscenities at them (118). The problem is that Christmas doesn’t make these choices himself. They just happen. For instance, “Christmas turning slowly, watching them dissolve and fade again into the pale road, found that he had the razor in his hand” (117). He does not reach for the razor. He doesn’t even know that he’s holding it. Like everything else, the razor is in his hand without Christmas’ knowledge or consent.

Christmas’ traumas provide the many and varied connections between his past and his specific future violent actions. At the first orphanage, Christmas is accidentally trapped, hidden in a bathtub sneaking toothpaste he eats as candy. He hides in the bathtub to avoid being caught with the toothpaste and is interrupted by a sexual tryst in the bathroom. The woman does not give consent for the sexual encounter which is paralleled in Christmas’ later rape of Joanna Burden. Witnessing this event leads to Christmas’ ejection from the orphanage, his kidnapping and recovery, and puts him on the road to being adopted by Mr. and Mrs. McEachern. Christmas as a child connects the toothpaste to “pinkwomansmell” (122). This “pinkwomansmell” is next mentioned in connection to Christmas’ first act of violence. At fourteen, Christmas goes to a barn with friends specifically to lose his virginity. As Christmas goes for his turn, he encounters the scent and immediately loses all control of himself like there is “something in him trying to get out” (156). Up to this point, Christmas has been the recipient of violent abuse. From this point on Christmas is the aggressor, but in a way that he can’t control. When that pinkwomansmell is present, Christmas is without agency. His beating of the woman is linked back to the sensory input. Although he went to the barn for sex, after smelling the woman “he kicked her hard, kicking into and through a choked sail of surprise and fear” (157). His first

purposes, to engage in sexual intercourse are immediately set aside, because his trauma holds him as if possessed.

Interestingly, although Christmas is the attacker, he is described as “enclosed by the womanshenegro and the haste.” Christmas is the one enclosed, trapped against his will as he “still struggled, fighting, weeping” (157). The lexicon of victimhood is attached to Christmas, not his actual victim. Christmas’ friends are as puzzled by the encounter as Christmas himself is as “none of them knew why he would and he could not have told them (157). On the following page, Christmas’ actions are described as “purely automatic,” “mechanical” while Christmas himself is described as “phantomlike” (158). Christmas is again the victim because “it was the woman alone who was unpredictable (159).

This scent is not the only sensory experience which leaves Christmas paralyzed as to agency. Christmas’ foster father, McEachern, abuses Christmas for his unwillingness or inability to memorize the Lutheran catechism. He is beaten in front of the bible, told to pray and commanded to “kneel down” (152). Years later, these elements are repeated when Joanna Burden attempts to coerce Christmas to pray over the bible. In the scene Burden is brutally murdered, Burden commands Christmas to “kneel.” The scene ends and we see nothing until Christmas hitchhikes carrying Burden’s pistol. When the audience does see the body, the savageness of the attack is apparent such that “her head has been cut pretty near off” (91), making it difficult to move the body because they are “afraid to try to pick her up and carry her out because her head might come clean off” (91). Christmas shows no ability to either understand or accept his own actions, instead placing blame on the dead woman because “she ought not to have started praying over me. She would have been all right if she hadn’t started

praying over me” (106). If Joanna Burden had not triggered a trauma response, Christmas would have been able to control himself and his violent urges.

However, violent urges are not the only situation in which Christmas loses agency. When Christmas first hits Bobbi he “found he [Christmas] was crying” (198), another action for which he is not in control. While many people can start crying before understanding the reason, Christmas also has no agency over his words. As a teenager, he lies to his foster father about selling the calf, but he “heard his mouth say the word with a kind of shocked amazement” (164). Even in this, Christmas has no agency. Throughout the entire novel Christmas is “being manipulated by an agent which he did not know” (207) and each of these instances harkens back to a situation in which he was the original victim. For instance, as a child, Christmas’ grandfather steals and hides him from his grandmother. Though he was originally the victim of the hiding, he eventually becomes the aggressor. He hides stolen money in his foster home, hides the suit that he purchases, hides the sale of the calf, the whiskey, his relationship with Burden. He repeats the mistakes of his abusers endlessly, but in a way that he does not control but is instead “doomed” to repeat (262). The violence he must repeat without choice eventually leads to his murder.

Beyond having neither memory nor agency, voice is also impaired in *Light in August*. Christmas is introduced to the reader in silence (33). He won’t even say his own name. Instead, he “turned without a word” and does “not speak to any of them” (33). He spends a full two days working at the mill before he says a single word (35). In fact, it’s Christmas’ silence that makes him most socially feared. Even after Christmas does start speaking, he seldom does as “he still had nothing to say to anyone, even after six months” (35). While many trauma survivors express a socially imposed isolation, Christmas imposes this on himself with his “silent and unflagging savageness” (39).

Silence plays many different roles in this book. Silence is imposed on Joanna Burden and her family because the town doesn't like her or her family for their support of the town's Black population (87). Byron finds misfortune in not remaining silence about Lena's boyfriend and Hightower finally finds protection in his silence. However, the most significant role silence plays is in trapping Christmas within his traumas. It is his silence, first and foremost, that feeds his isolation and other's perception of his savagery. It is seen as strange, socially inappropriate and marks him as different, an outsider, from the very beginning of the story. The inability to speak correlates with the inability to remember, both denied to Christmas, but important for Levi because "For Levi, vocabulary and pronunciation serve as organic artifacts of what happened in the camps, provocatively carrying with them the memory of that experience" (Rosen, *Sounds of Defiance* 5). While Christmas is depicted as without voice, Levi shows significant control and use of his voice.

Even with control of his own voice, Levi still notes the inadequacy of words, not meaning that survivors can't narrate their traumas, but that language isn't strong enough to evoke the privation. Levi writes: "We say 'hunger,' we say 'tiredness,' 'fear,' 'pain,' we say 'winter' and they are different things. They are free words, created and used by free men who lived in comfort and suffering in their homes." But the suffering that Levi reveals, and which is experienced in the death camps requires a "new, harsh language . . . and only this language could express what it means to toil the whole day in the wind, with the temperature below freezing, wearing only a shirt, underpants, cloth jacket and trousers, and in one's body nothing but weakness, hunger and knowledge of the end drawing near" (123). It is not Levi's voice that is inadequate, but language itself which lacks the ability to describe the intensity of this moment which allows him to "bec[ome] aware that our language lacks words to express this offense, the

demolition of a man” (26). The language is simply not harsh enough, but, pointedly, he still makes the attempt.

The claiming of voice after survival is of incredible importance to Levi, while silencing survivors is the particular desire of the oppressor. In his work *The Drowned and the Saved*, which immediately follows *Survival in Auschwitz*, Levi notes that for Nazi soldiers leading death marches, “[i]t did not matter that they [the prisoners] might die along the way; what really mattered was that they should not tell their story” (*Drowned* 4). This is important for the costs at which survivors claim their voice which seems equal and opposite to the lengths at which oppressors use silence as force. Speaking trauma is a way to assert control over the trauma and the narrative surrounding that trauma while, “[t]o be silenced is to have that power denied. Silence is thus emblematic of powerlessness in our society” (Ahrens, 263). In fact, throughout Levi’s narrative, we see that the Nazi guards weaponizing silence. In the death camps “nobody explains anything” (24) and “the officer says you must be quiet” (24). The silence of victims does not come naturally, instead “we remain silent, although we are a little ashamed of our silence” (24). The desire to speak plays a significant role in Levi’s ultimate survival. Levi says that “even in this place one can survive and therefore one must survive, to tell the story, to bear witness” (41). It is the necessity of using that voice that Levi credits with his survival.

Where we get very little voice from Christmas himself, Levi’s narrative puts particular emphasis on voice, and not just his own voice, but the voices of his fellow prisoners “He told me his story, and today I have forgotten it, but it was certainly a sorrowful, cruel and moving story; because so are all our stories, hundreds of thousands of stories, all different and all full of a tragic, disturbing necessity. We tell them to each other in the evening” (66). Levi is not the only person speaking. The stories, the voice, even in the midst of trauma, is of utmost importance.

Voice is more than Levi's ability to speak, narrate or write his trauma, but the ability to connect his own attitudes and beliefs within that trauma—the ability to retain his personhood within the trauma and extending afterward. For instance, Levi well states a critique of a particular prayer of thankfulness offered from someone who was not selected for the crematorium. Levi witnesses this prayer offered loudly and in the presence of a man who had been selected to die. Levi writes, “Kuhn . . . thank[s] God because he has not been chosen” before asking “Does he not see Beppo the Greek in the bunk next to him, Beppo who is twenty years old and is going to the gas chamber the day after tomorrow and knows it and lies there looking fixedly at the light without saying anything and without even thinking anymore?” (129). He criticizes Kuhn, “Does Kuhn not understand that what has happened today is an abomination, which no propitiatory prayer, no pardon, no expiation by the guilty, which nothing at all in the power of man can ever clean again?” (129). Levi ends his denunciation with this final, powerful line: “If I was God, I would spit at Kuhn's prayer” (130). Levi does not just recount the situation, he is not just a narrator of events, it is not just a transcript of suffering, instead he offers his own thoughts and a powerful repudiation. Levi uses his voice not as only a reciter of fact, but with his full moral agency attached, using that voice and agency to condemn the man who, in prayer to God, forgets his fellow man.

Levi doesn't just use his voice to condemn. Of his friend Alberto and Alberto's group, he writes, “They must have been about twenty thousand, coming from different camps. Almost in their entirety they vanished during the evacuation march. Alberto was among them. Perhaps someone will write their story one day (155). Thus, voice can be claimed in trauma, not just for oneself, but for people who did not survive. Levi claims his own voice, and also writes for Alberto and encourages others to also write in the same way.

There is a moment in *Survival in Auschwitz* where memory, agency and voice all combine in the narrative. Levi is witnessing the 14th hanging that he has witnessed during his internment. Levi writes “the trapdoor opened, the body wriggled horribly; the band began playing again and we were once more lined up and filed past the quivering body of the dying man” (149). Despite the violent nature of a specific incident that, by itself, fits the definition of trauma, Levi recalls and writes the moment. He remembers the trap door opening and how it felt to view the body, beyond how the body appeared in the moment of death. For agency, Levi writes of the man who was executed for taking part in a rebellion attempting to overthrow the SS at Auschwitz. This group of rebels, despite significant trauma, organize and attempt a coup—an expression of agency even in the midst of heinous trauma. Of the condemned man Levi writes “The fact remains that a few hundred men at Birkenau...will bring him glory, not infamy” (149). Before the execution, the man’s last words strike the listeners who must watch his death. Levi narrates and writes it, thus carrying not only Levi’s voice, but the executed man’s voice, onward. In experience after experience, Levi’s voice is important, but so are the voices of the other’s around him.

The very things that Levi underlines as monumentally important, and indeed the only things available to grasp onto when experiencing severe trauma, are the same things put into question by Critical Trauma Theory. For Levi and for others the importance of not forgetting, of use his surviving voice to witness, and of refusing consent and thereby retaining his own agency is overwhelmingly important. The memory, agency and voice are not only claimed, they are clung to, they are the reasons for survival in the first place. For Levi, who seeks “to survive with the precise purpose of recounting the things we had witnessed and endured” (Levi *If this is a Man*, 217) trauma theory as it stands belittles those unyielding efforts. Further, it is not the

silence of survivors, by of bystanders that Levi notices and condemns. In the end, Levi condemns the collective looking away from trauma “not one of the guards, neither Italian or German, had the courage to come and see what men do when they know they have to die” (15). It is the looking away, the unwillingness to see or hear suffering that Levi condemns.

Theories that memory, agency and voice do not survive trauma cannot account for the lengths to which people will go to seek words, even in the most heinous situation. For instance, the nine-year-old Jewish girl who wrote one verse of a song and hid it stitched to her clothes prior to her death. The song even included instructions on the melody. The song reads:

There was once a little Elzunia

She’s dying all alone now.

For her daddy’s in Majdanek,

Her mummy in Auschwitz-Birkenau. (Berlin 397)

In the midst of her trauma and contemplating her own death, nine-year-old Elzunia claimed her memory to write the location of her parents, her voice to compose this verse and her agency to stitch it into her clothes. Clearly, Elzunia and those who shared similar fates, did not become the silent, amnesiac husks of their abusers.

Chapter V

V. Conclusion

It is my argument that the theoretical underpinnings of Critical Trauma Theory as it is now constituted is in error, specifically because it relies too heavily on the idea of traumatic amnesia. Further research should analyze how CTT came to these particular theoretical underpinnings. This should include using Victorian literature to ascertain whether Freud's conceptions of trauma are possibly colored by Victorian social structures including gender and class. As CTT now conceptualizes trauma, survivors of trauma are othered. Instead of being heard, survivors are studied in research and conversations in which they are not invited to participate. Because of the idea that trauma removes memory, agency and voice, people who experience trauma people become the other. Much of the time, in mainstream American (Western) society, trauma is dehumanized, leaving no room for how other societies and culture approach trauma and its processes, and leaving little room for the consideration that trauma as conceptualized by Freud and Van der Kolk and Herman might be severely outdated. Not only have we created an idea of how trauma survival should look, but we also then attempt to trap trauma survivors into those spaces, instead of extending the space to fit the complexity of a wide range of trauma experience and outcomes.

There are theoretical problems with CTT as it is now constituted. Applying both Caruth and McNally would open up the field of trauma studies as it would describe the brain as it responds to trauma, but also the societal isolation trauma-affected individuals face after surviving the trauma. McNally and Caruth ought to form two parallel tracks for trauma theory. Caruth's unremembering argument is deep and poignant when it is used to explain societal and cultural norms in the treatment of trauma-affected individuals. Pederson presents a binary, an

either/or situation and in doing so creates a false dilemma, a logical fallacy. While McNally's understanding of the brain in trauma is far superior to Caruth's, if Caruth's argument were modified to apply to societal reactions, it would deepen and broaden the understanding of trauma in literature, instead of reinforcing foundations of social shame by applying outdated scientific theory. I am encouraged by Josh Pederson's recent article "Speak, Trauma: Towards a Revised Understanding of Trauma Theory," because, although I disagree with Peterson's ultimate conclusion, it signals a readiness for change within trauma studies. There is a need to embrace the possibility that how we envision trauma, how we conceptualize trauma, might not be how trauma actually operates.

While not a repudiation of fiction, because of the particular Freudian influence, trauma survivor Joe Christmas is portrayed without memory or voice, and more damningly, as so victimized by trauma that he has lost himself entirely, including moral agency. Christmas is not in control of himself. Instead, he is controlled by his trauma experiences, doomed to become his abusers. Through the development of Christmas as a character, we see what Freudian theories of trauma expect for the life progression of an abuse survivor. For survivors, seeing themselves portrayed in this way can be deeply hurtful. Speaking or teaching of trauma in a way that focuses on the absence of memory, agency and voice disempowers "those who suffered from the experience of violence, denying them agency and control over their own responses and the transformative journey offered by their own narratives and potential reevaluation of former 'truths' (Simine 143).

The opposite is seen in *Survival in Auschwitz*, where, having survived a prolonged and particularly severe trauma, Primo Levi immediately writes. He uses his voice to witness. If there were going to be a trauma in which the videographer of the brain would be expected to leave, it

would be the certain trauma inflicted by the Holocaust. However, what we actually see is the opposite. Levi's memories, like the many other survivors who offered witness are, clear, distinct and vivid. Survivors crave communication. For Levi speaking was a compulsion, his witnessing was absolutely necessary to life, truly "competing with other basic needs" (Levi 2). More, Levi's agency is not impaired, even when those choices are severely limited. Levi does not become his abusers. He is not on a collision path with his trauma. Instead, he and others cling to their humanity, their voices and even those particularly painful memories. In order to tell their stories "[t]he witnesses to the event invented a new literature, that of testimony. All of them felt the need to bear testimony for the future. And that need became an obsession, the single most powerful obsession of their lives" (Wiesel, *Against* 100). I would argue that we see trauma as silencing, not because it is, but instead because, for our own comfort, we want trauma to be silent.

The social silencing of trauma, and contrived distance from trauma, explains why so many people describe the loss of friends after the loss of a spouse or a child. Non-trauma-affected individuals don't know what to say. Truly, it is non-trauma-affected individuals, the bystanders, who lose their words, who find trauma unspeakable while trauma-affected individuals struggle to find the "interior liberation" Primo Levi describes. Obtaining the interior liberation is complicated by survivors when trauma is socially disenfranchised, in line with Caruth's "unremembered" trauma but applied to the society. It is a collective, not an individual, cognitive dissonance that stops progression by blocking interior liberation. The range of tellability supports the idea that the problem with trauma communication lies not in the faulty memory or speech capacity of survivors, but in the impaired receptive language of listeners in a society that requires trauma to be positive in order to be shared. This is important to consider,

because our social disdain for trauma makes it less likely that survivors will claim their experiences, which stunts growth and healing, burying the experience under shame. Trauma exacerbated by social shame is truly isolating. On the other hand, the ability to speak trauma within a community provides, not only the suspension of disbelief, but also the suspension of shame. To be heard, trauma survivors must “stubbornly persist” in bearing witness to a socially “forgotten wound” to use Caruth’s own language (Caruth 5).

Neither is the social disenfranchisement of trauma is not relegated to one kind of pain. Holocaust survivors wanted to speak to the point, in Boder’s case, where thousands were willing to speak to the interviewer’s back to tell their stories. Holocaust survivors formed their own commissions have a space to speak. Survivors of sexual assault and child abuse actively seek socially appropriate venues to speak their traumas, many times to be told that their experiences are “inappropriate.” Teens with depression and suicidal ideation turn to anonymous forums to speak their traumas without social scorn. The bereaved find comfort in speaking of their dead loved ones and the manners of their death. It is important that, regardless of the trauma and regardless of the circumstances, trauma survivors both remember and speak.

What the traumatized lack is not the ability to remember their traumas and is not the ability to speak their traumas, but the social permission to speak. Caruth asks her readers, “Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it?” (Caruth 5). Part of the ongoing experience of having survived trauma for survivors is the loss of words, but not in the way that CTT currently acknowledges. Survivors lose words because they are no longer socially permitted to speak those defining experiences. Caruth wonders which is the trauma: “the unbearable nature of the event” or the “unbearable nature of its survival”? I would argue that, at times, at the most silent times, the trauma is in the survival. If survivors were

socially permitted to speak without scorn and an inflicted social shame, they might, in turn, claim their own “internal liberation” so ardently posited by Primo Levi, who speaks of his own internal liberation though the public claiming of his trauma. Internal liberation is difficult to claim without listeners, perhaps explaining why Levi “divides . . . mankind into two categories: those who listen to you and those who don’t” (Levi 176). Finding so many in the latter group, Elie Wiesel asks “was the testimony received, has the tale been heard?” (Wiesel, *Against* 107). Wiesel saw the silence as, not the silence of survivors, but the collective silence of a world that turned away. He admits being “obsessed with silence because of the silence of the world. I do not understand why the world was silent when we needed its outcry” (110) It was about this collective silence that Wiesel asked “Why the people who say, ‘let’s not talk about it—it just reopens old wounds’? But we must talk about it” (47).

Social silences of trauma serve neither survivors nor the listeners it seeks to insulate from the uncomfortable. Instead, “the trope of the unspeakable actually gives permission to turn away” (Stampfl 18). Acknowledging the discomfort implicit in hearing trauma, Elie Wiesel admits: “Yes, our tales are tales of despair, but... [t]ales of despair ultimately mean tales against despair” (*Against* 108). In fact, it is precisely because it is uncomfortable that trauma should be spoken, given that “[o]ne of the reasons for the Nazi’s success is the fact that few could actually conceive of the horrors they plotted” (Felman qtd. in Pederson 99). Communicating a similar sentiment, Wiesel states “[f]or the sake of our children and yours, we invoke the past so as to save the future. We recall ultimate violence in order to prevent its reoccurrence” (Wiesel, *Against* 126). It is perhaps because of this that Irene Visser argues that “it is the ethical responsibility of governments to enable and facilitate such public expressions of trauma” (129). Perhaps in the hearing of trauma, it might even be that “[re]cognition of the truth will make the

reader more compassionate towards the sufferings and the predicament of these...people” (Las Casas qtd. in Hart 25). However, alongside preventing atrocity and learning compassion, Johnathan Hart offers another reason to listen to the uncomfortable, “it might be that we...need to face the dark side of ourselves and our cultures, to see a kind of otherness within that is ugly, mean, and unruly, just waiting to get out” (Hart 26).

Neither is the problem of the socially silenced trauma purely theoretical. How a society views trauma bleeds into its social structures. Because of the social shame attached to trauma, victims of rape are reticent to report the rape, leading to many rapists going unpunished. Thus, our view of trauma becomes our judicial system, becomes our medical system, becomes our social services, and enters our classrooms. Inability or unwillingness to hear the painful, to learn from old wounds, makes a society more apt to reproduce that pain and wounding. Warning against “the ashes of yesterday” infecting the present and future, Elie Wiesel admonishes audiences to “listen to them. What they have to say about their past constitutes the basis of our future: fanaticism leads to racism, racism to hate, hate to murder, murder to the death of the species. The danger lies in forgetting” (Wiesel, *Against* 383). Wiesel sees the social unhearing and forgetting of trauma as more than a passive act. Instead, he condemns those who will not hear, despite the discomfort. According to Wiesel, “[t]he Germans did not want their crimes to be remembered. Therefore I say that whoever forgets is an accomplice of those murders. And whoever tends to forget and moves others to forget is an accomplice of those murderers” (87). The memory, agency and voice of trauma survivors is of paramount importance. Teaching and theorizing that memory, agency and voice do not survive trauma, further injures and isolates survivors in order to remove the discomfort of their voices.

It is time to examine why our theories of trauma are rooted in, and dependent on, the continued silence of marginalized groups, all under the guise of paternalistically allowing survivors to be silent. Instead of gracious condescension to pain, “those who wield the rhetoric of the unspeakable are both...posing moralistically while taking the easy way out” (Stampfl 17). Naomi Mandel argues that the trope of the unspeakable trauma performs a “rhetorical sleight of hand” by “evoke[ing] the privileges and problems inherent in speech while actively distancing itself from them,” which “simultaneously gestures toward and away from the complex ethical negotiations that representing atrocity entails” (Mandel 5). Put more succinctly, “evoking the unspeakable in the context of trauma is not respectable” (Stampfl 17).

Jankiel Wiernik was a *sonderkommando* at Auschwitz where he witnessed countless murders during his forced labor in the crematoriums. Of these experiences, and despite the stigma inherent in being a *sonderkommando*, Wiernik writes, “I suffered most when I looked at the children being accompanied by their mothers, or walking alone entirely ignorant of the fact that within a few minutes their lives would be snuffed out under horrible torture” (qtd. in Wiesel *Against*, 103). Reading this passage to an audience at Northwestern University in 1977, Elie Wiesel paused and addressed the discomfort inherent in the audience hearing those words. Wiesel told the assembly, “[i]f Wiernik had the courage to write, you must listen” (103).

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