Beyond Singularity:

Rehabilitating the Trauma Narrative

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Abstract

Representing the Hegelian dialectic of the trauma narrative, this article identifies the anti-realist mode of representation as an avenue for the achievement of the real. The works of prominent scholars such as Sigmund Freud and Cathy Caruth establish the essential incomprehensibility of trauma. However, the dominant discourse in Trauma Studies poses problems to historical understanding, namely singularity. In response, John Sanbonmatsu offers his theory of the *holocaust sublime*, proposing the realist mode of representation as an antidote to singularity and as a means of promoting a productive relationship with the past. Expanding on Sanbonmatsu's work, this article identifies the unique capacities of the anti-realist mode of representation to relay the truth of trauma, the "truth as it *seemed*" in the words of Tim O'Brien. Rather than pitting the real against the anti-real, this article argues that in conjunction with realist trauma narratives, the anti-realist mode of representation has the capacity to promote a cognitive and emotional connection with trauma, the narrative success of which can be measured, primarily, through its capacity to humanize.

Keywords

Psychology; Trauma; Narrative; Representation; Anti-real; Representational Schemata; Singularity; Transcendence; Truth; Memory

Introduction

"A true war story, if truly told, makes your stomach believe."
(Tim O'Brien 74)

The works of prominent scholars have established the inherent incomprehensibility of trauma. Out of this dominant discourse in the field of Trauma Studies, certain moral and socio-political ramifications emerge, namely singularity. In recognition of such ramifications, John Sanbonmatsu responds with "The Holocaust Sublime: Singularity, Representation, and the Violence of Everyday Life" (2009). He proposes the realist mode of representation as an antidote to the dangers of singularity and as a means of promoting a productive relationship with the past. Sanbonmatsu warns against the transcendent nature of anti-realism, suggesting that it contributes to the moral superiority and separative thinking so characteristic of the *holocaust sublime*. To advance Sanbonmatsu's argument rather than oppose it outright, this article assumes a psychological perspective in its examination of narrative modalities used to represent trauma. This article identifies the anti-realist mode of representation as uniquely capable of relaying the inherent incomprehensibility of traumatic experience which "*has no place"* (Caruth 53) in a history dominated by narratives in the realist mode of representation.

This article will not pin the real against the anti-real, but argue that through the anti-realist mode of representation, we can arrive at a "truth of traumatic experience" (Caruth 5) which honors its elusive, paradoxical, and obscured nature. Rendering the truth of trauma—the "truth as it *seemed*" (O'Brien 68)—can promote a cognitive and emotional response, to the effect of counteracting the habits of thought and social practice which inform cyclical patterns of historical evils (Sanbonmatsu 102). In conjunction with realist representations of trauma, produced by "scientific" procedure—for which there ultimately is no substitute—anti-realist trauma narratives can humanize the lived experience of those involved in the trauma.

With regard to the trauma representation, anti-realist rendering is an avenue for the achievement of the real. Moving from psychology to theory to synthesis, this article arrives at a Hegelian dialectic of the trauma narrative. Out of the gray space spanning history and philosophy, narrative and truth, aesthetics and politics, emerge non-traditional representational schemata from the likes of Tim O'Brien, Kurt Vonnegut, Abdu-Assad, and Frederick Terna. Anti-realist trauma representations such as these demonstrate the capacity of transcendent modalities of storytelling to inhabit the temporal schisms which exist between past and present, the event of trauma and its eventual recall. These representations promote an empathetic and cognitive connection that urges a viewer's recognition of their own subject position relative to the trauma and not as an exception to it. This article concludes by addressing the importance of committing trauma narratives in the form of non-traditional representational schemata to history.

On the Nature of Trauma

This article examines global trauma narratives, focusing on a singular actor within each event, whose personal experience of trauma humanizes the atrocity at large. Global narratives of this variety grant access to the psychology of the individual whose experience of trauma is being relayed. These narrative minutiae can assist the development of contemporary consciousness through discoveries of the past. This section draws from the dominant discourse in Trauma Psychology—namely the works of Sigmund Freud and Cathy Caruth—to explore the nature of trauma. In defining the experience of trauma by its hallmark obscuration, this article also calls into question the nature of truth and representation as it pertains to trauma.

Fixation to Trauma

Freud differentiates the experiences of fright, fear, and anxiety according to the prerequisite of prior knowledge. As forms of expectation, anxiety and fear rely on prior knowledge. They depend on some awareness of a "definitive object of which to be afraid" (Freud, *Pleasure Principle* 11), which insulates the mind. "'Fright' however, is the name we give to the state a person gets into when he has run into danger without being prepared for it; it emphasizes the factor of surprise" (Freud, *Pleasure Principle* 11)— a quintessential aspect of what Freud has referred to as "traumatic neuroses." Elaborating on the effects of "traumatic neuroses," Freud invokes the study of dreams:

> The study of dreams may be considered the most trustworthy method of investigating deep mental processes. Now dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright. This astonishes people far too little. They think that the fact that traumatic experience is constantly forcing itself upon the patient even in his sleep is proof of the strength of that experience: the patient is, as one might say, fixated to his trauma. (Freud, *Pleasure Principle* 11-12)

The idea of fixation as a force that mutually binds the subject to their trauma is novel to the study of "traumatic neuroses." Freud says, "I am not aware, however, that patients suffering from traumatic neurosis are much occupied in their waking lives with memories of their accident. Perhaps they are more concerned with *not* thinking of it" (Freud, *Pleasure Principle* 12). Herein lay the grounds for further examination of the elusive yet nagging aspects of trauma.

The Enigmatic Experience

According to Cathy Caruth in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory,* "The phenomenon of trauma has seemed to become all-inclusive, but it has done so precisely because it brings us to

the limits of our understanding: if psychoanalysis, psychiatry, sociology, and even literature are beginning to hear each other anew in the study of trauma, it is because they are listening through the radical disruption and gaps of traumatic experience" (4). The DSM-5 broadly defines trauma as "a psychological, physical, or emotional response to an event that is overwhelming and causes feelings of helplessness, fear, and terror" (American Psychiatric Association). We know from the dominant discourse around trauma and memory, however, that trauma is more than just a psyche devoid of the protections of prior knowledge, subsequently plagued with highly-charged emotions. Trauma pedagogy also tells us that the amygdala, the part of the brain that processes emotions such as fear and anxiety, does not register linear time. The experience of trauma involves a disruption of perception and temporality. Arguably, trauma is impossible to isolate or capture, hence Caruth's poignant call to listen to the "radical disruption and gaps of traumatic experience" (4). Relative truth is inextricably bound to the characteristically obscured experience of trauma. Regarding traumatic dreams and flashbacks with uncanny and insistent likeness, Caruth states:

> It is this literality and insistent return which constitutes trauma and points towards its enigmatic core: the delay or incompleteness in knowing, or even in seeing, an overwhelming occurrence that then remains, in its insistent return, absolutely *true* to the event. It is indeed this truth of traumatic experience that forms the center of its pathology or symptoms; it is not a pathology, that is, of falsehood or displacement of meaning, but of history itself. If PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder] must be understood as a pathological symptom, then it is not so much a symptom of the unconscious, as it is a symptom of history. The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess. (5)

Elaborating on Freud's idea of a dual *fixation to trauma* (Freud, *Pleasure Principle* 12), Caruth suggests that trauma as a symptom of history possesses its victim all the while remaining completely out of the grasp of those possessed. Its nature lies in its incompleteness and inaccessibility. The enigmatic nature of trauma poses an enormous challenge to historical understanding. Relative truth, with respect to the person experiencing the traumatic event, is what this article will prioritize in an investigation of trauma representation.

With Regard to Latency

The individual's experience of trauma is characterized by a perception that is both obscured and elusive. Freud discovered that when faced with trauma, the psyche becomes overwhelmed and cannot fully process the severity of the situation while it is happening. He describes the return of the traumatic experience after a period of delay, factoring time into the experience of trauma. In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud coins the term *latency*:

> It may happen that someone gets away, apparently unharmed, from the spot where he has suffered a shocking accident, for instance a train collision. In the course of the following weeks, however, he develops a series of grave psychical and motor symptoms, which can be ascribed only to shock or whatever else happened at the time of the accident. He has developed a "traumatic neurosis." This appears quite incomprehensible and is therefore a novel fact. The time that elapsed between the accident and the first appearance of the symptoms is called the 'incubation period,' a transparent allusion to the pathology of infectious disease… It is the feature one might term *latency.* (84)

Here, Freud describes a suspended understanding that can be realized only through a progression of the traumatic occurrence, to its repression, then to its return. In response to Freud's *latency,* Caruth adds, "what is truly striking… is not so much the period of forgetting that occurs after the

accident, but rather…. the fact that the victim of the crash was never fully conscious during the accident itself" (7). The elusive trauma, by its very nature, cannot be fully experienced, quantified, or reduced to any one time, space, or form and yet, the lost and/or fragmented experience prevails, bound to its subject. Therefore, a defining characteristic of trauma is its all-pervasive inaccessibility.

If trauma is an ongoing, non-linear experience, and the construction of history depends on quantitative scales of time, how can a history of trauma be effectively rendered? Time remains a crucial factor in a crisis of truth. Caruth suggests, "The historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all" (8). Dr. Dori Laub states in "No One Bears Witness to the Witness" in *Testimony: Cries of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1991) that during the Holocaust there was a "collapse of witnessing." This not only references the encampment walls behind which unthinkable evils were concealed from the world, but also the inability of those inside the event to fully experience the incessant trauma as it was taking place. Arguably, this conundrum only amplifies the need for documentation. Yet, elusive temporality and obscured perception continue to challenge historical understanding of traumatic experience. An incubation period, host to the initial forgetting and eventual remembering of the trauma, is required to obtain the details that follow. In stating "the flashback or traumatic reenactment conveys… both the *truth of an event,* and *the truth of its incomprehensibility*" (153), Caruth suggests certain criteria for the effective rendering of trauma.

On Recollection

Where does trauma exist in relation to memory? There is the traumatic event as it happened, almost adjunct to or even independent of the individual who experienced it, which can be recorded through "scientific" procedures of documentation. But there is also the incomprehensible experience of it. While the full scope of the trauma may have been lost to repression—"inaccessible to conscious recall and control" (Caruth 151)—the recurring images which seem to haunt the survivor, by contradiction, "remain absolutely accurate and precise" (Caruth 151). This paradox is what Freud refers to as "war neurosis" and forms what we now know as PTSD. Caruth speaks to the paradoxical, illusory, and nagging elements of traumatic memory with respect to time and accessibility:

> Not having been fully integrated as it occurred, the event cannot become, as Janet says, a 'narrative memory' that is integrated into a completed story of the past. The history that a flashback tells—as psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and neurobiology equally suggest—is, therefore, a history that literally *has no place*, neither in the past, in which it was not fully experienced, nor in the present, in which its precise images and enactments are not fully understood. In its repeated imposition as both image and amnesia, the trauma thus seems to evoke the difficult truth of a history that is constituted by the very incomprehensibility of its occurrence. (153)

This lack of temporal integration differentiates traumatic memory from narrative memory. The traumatic memory is not fully perceived or incorporated at the time of its occurrence. It is characterized by its later return, and lacks the structures of time and respective locality. Caruth suggests that there is a "truth of traumatic experience" (5) which falls into a category all of its own, irrespective of a historical truth produced by "scientific" procedures.

Traumatic Memory

Owing to the incomprehensibility of trauma is its analogous inarticulability. Certain disappearances are characteristic of traumatic memory; yet there is an almost ominous exactitude which denotes returns of the trauma. With regard to memory and recall, Caruth states, "[T]he capacity to continually, in the flashback, reproduce it in exact detail—appears to be connected, in traumatic experience, precisely with the way it *escapes* full consciousness as it occurs…. the 'etching into the brain' of an event in trauma may be associated with its elision of its normal encoding in memory" (153). Caruth credits this "strange connection between the *elision* of memory and the *precision* of recall" (153) to the works of Sigmund Freud and Pierre Janet. Elaborating on the interplay between memory and *elision*, Caruth states:

> The capacity to remember is also the capacity to elide or distort, and in other cases, as [Bessel A.] van der Kolk and [Onno] van der Hart show, may mean the capacity simply to forget. Yet beyond the loss of precision there is another, more profound, disappearance: the loss, precisely, of the event's essential incomprehensibility, the force of its *affront to understanding.* It is this dilemma that underlies many survivors' reluctance to translate their experience into speech. (154)

Among the profound disappearances typical of traumatic memory is the loss of the event's incomprehensibility. Together with the paradoxical *elision* of memory and *precision* of recall, this poses enormous difficulty to the act of committing the truth of trauma to representation.

Integration of Traumatic Memory

Having established that a successful or accurate representation of trauma is one that honors its essential incomprehensibility (Caruth 153), this article now turns to effective application. The question of impact naturally succeeds the question of process. Regarding process, speech is merely one mode of traumatic integration. According to Caruth:

> The danger of speech, of integration into the narration of memory, may lie not in what it cannot understand, but in that it understands too much. Speech seems to offer only, as Kevin Newmark says, the attempt 'to move away from the experience of shock by integrating it into a stable understanding of it.' The possibility of integration into memory and the consciousness of history thus raises the question, van der Kolk and van der Hart ultimately observe, 'whether it is not a sacrilege of the traumatic experience to play with the reality of the past?' (154)

This passage implies that honoring a trauma's inherent incomprehensibility is synonymous with the preservation (as opposed to manipulation) of the reality of the traumatic experience. Caruth suggests that there is a "truth of traumatic experience" (5) which exists independent of scientific means of validation. Borrowing from the ideas of van der Kolk and van der Hart, she prompts the examination of the reality of the past relative to the reality of traumatic experience.

If, according to Newmark, "the attempt 'to move away from the experience of shock by integrating it into a stable understanding of it'" (Caruth 154) disadvantages the sanctity of traumatic experience, how do we record it in understandable terms without trivializing, banalizing, or singularizing the trauma at large?

Traversing the Space Between Philosophy and History

In response to the problem of integrating traumatic memory, John Sanbonmatsu presents his theory of the *holocaust sublime.* Sanbonmatsu offers a theoretical framework, out of which this article will work to illustrate how the anti-realist mode of representation is uniquely capable of capturing the essential incomprehensibility of trauma, to the effect of promoting a productive engagement with the past. The *holocaust sublime,* based on the Kantian sublime*,* is characterized by a retroactive aestheticization and isolation of traumatic events in history. Sanbonmatsu states, "Rather than help the subject face his or her true moral and civic duties, the *holocaust sublime*

may interfere with the subject's quest for an authentic moral relation to trauma" (105). When one considers a historical trauma as singular and definitive, they approach that past horror with a certain level of moral transcendence, failing to realize their subject position relative to contemporary evils. This article argues that the goal of a productive engagement with traumatic histories is to achieve a cognitive and emotional connection to the past, which humanizes the masses involved. Sanbonmatsu refers to this end as the achievement of "an authentic and moral relation to trauma" (105). He offers the realist mode of trauma representation as an antidote to the transcendent effects of the *holocaust sublime*.

Sanbonmatsu opens his argument by presenting two types of trauma representation that emerge from their relative sociological positions. He defines the realist sociological position as being "rooted in rather than an exception to the fundamental structures of modernity" (103). Realist modes of representation might take the form of oral histories and non-fiction, among other fact-based mediums. The anti-realist sociological position acts as inverse to the real, transcending structures of modernity. Anti-realist modes of representation might include fiction, music, painting, dance, and any other modalities which lend themselves to the freedoms of abstraction.

The terminology of the *holocaust sublime* opens a forum wherein a phenomenon as abstract and ephemeral as emotionally engaging with traumatic history can be discussed. Sanbonmatsu's argument poses the question of relative positionality—real versus the anti-real—not to the constructor of history, but to the consumer of history.

The *Holocaust Sublime*

John Sanbonmatsu targets an inverse relationship in which an interaction with the aesthetic provokes a type of transcendence: "The value of the sublime experience according to [Immanuel] Kant lies in its ability to elicit in it a sense of absolute freedom as autonomous rational beings. As Crowther puts it, 'moral consciousness is sublime *because* it manifests the ultimate authority and transcendence of our rational over our sensible being'" (108). Herein lay the foundations of the *holocaust sublime*—morality and consciousness as components of transcendence.

Sanbonmatsu looks closely at the interplay of morality, consciousness, and transcendence within the sublime through an analysis of the self in relation to the aesthetics of global trauma:

> Drawing on Kant's analytic of the sublime, in which the subject, in confronting an awesome or terrifying phenomenon from a position of safety, comes to realize his or her own powers of transcendence and moral superiority, I argue that the *holocaust sublime* encourages the viewing subject to 'face' overwhelming horrors of the past, but without having to confront the subject's actual responsibility for the atrocities of the present. By pitting the extraordinary or 'singular' against the banal and everyday, the *holocaust sublime* thus obscures, rather than reveals, the habits of thought and social structures that make genocidal practices inevitable. (101-102)

Here, Sanbonmatsu considers time and the autonomy of the viewing subject. In speaking to "the habits of thought and social structure that make genocidal practices inevitable" (102), Sanbonmatsu is pinpointing a historical pattern which his theory attempts to disrupt. He places the impetus on the individual, calling for relative action. Specifically, he calls for the recognition of personal "powers of transcendence and moral superiority" (101) in an evaluation of the self, relative to the aesthetics of global trauma. Sanbonmatsu explores, "the possibility that in invoking a particular aesthetic dimension on our encounter with past atrocities—a Kantian *Sublime*—representations of singularity disadvantage forms of understanding and perceiving that

might in fact offer us a more productive engagement with the past" (105). Sanbonmatsu reiterates the role of the individual as a root cause of mass atrocities, stating, "Atrocities, after all, are the consequences of real-world ideologies, social practices, cultural norms, and so on" (115). By implication, his theory looks not only to the past, but requires a close examination of the present. It can be assumed that through the present recognition of one's subject position relative to global trauma, Sanbonmatsu's effort to narrow the moral schisms we create between ourselves and atrocities of the past is intended to impact the future. Sanbonmatsu's proposed antidote to the harmful effects of the *holocaust sublime* is the development of a productive relationship with the past. Establishing that singularity and transcendence, symptomatic of the *holocaust sublime*, preclude a productive engagement with the past, Sanbonmatsu seeks to pinpoint the aesthetic realms within which an "authentic moral relation to trauma" (105) can be established.

The Realist and the Anti-realist Sociological Positions

Sanbonmatsu continuously references the two opposing poles of debate about Holocaust representations established by Michael Rothberg—the 'realist' and the 'anti-realist' sociological positions—applying them to representations of global trauma at large. Rothberg elaborates on the distinction between these two main poles of Holocaust discourse:

> By realist I mean both an epistemological claim that the Holocaust is knowable and a representational claim that this knowledge can be translated into a familiar mimetic universe. The realist approach has characterized the dominant scholarly methodology, that of historians and others who assert the necessity of considering the Holocaust according to 'scientific' procedures and inscribing the events within continuous historical narratives. By antirealist I mean both a

> claim that the Holocaust is not knowable or would be knowable only under radically new regimes of knowledge and that it cannot be captured in traditional representational schemata. (4)

According to Rothberg, the aesthetic dimensions invoked to represent past atrocities are born out of these two sociological positions. One of the more unequivocal examples of the anti-realist mode of representation is the claim from Holocaust Survivor Elie Wiesel, cited by both Rothberg and Sanbonmatsu, "'Auschwitz cannot be explained nor can it be visualized' because it 'transcends history'" (Rothberg 5).

According to both relative theoretical arguments, transcendence, the singularization of history, and continued cycles of violence function in dangerous harmony. Rothberg and Sanbonmatsu prefer the realist mode of representation, "knowledge [which] can be translated into a familiar mimetic universe" (Rothberg 4). Both dispute the validity of the anti-realist mode of representation and its transcendent translation of global trauma into "radically new regimes of knowledge" (Rothberg 4). Ultimately, they propose the realist mode of representation as a means of fostering a productive relationship with the past, counteracting the detrimental effects of the *holocaust sublime*.

It is important to note here that there is no substitute for aesthetic representations of global trauma originating from the realist sociological position. Trauma narratives formed according to 'scientific' procedures, calculable metrics, and familiar mimetic methodology, which exist in continuity with history, have dominated scholarly discourse and rightly so. This article agrees with the capacity of realist representational schemata to promote a productive relationship with the past and in doing so foster "an authentic moral relation" (Sanbonmatsu 105) between the viewing subject and the global trauma being represented.

Banality, Aestheticization, and Singularization

Assuming his firm position in the debate around trauma representation, Sanbonmatsu states, "[S]iding with 'realist' intellectuals who instead emphasize the rootedness of genocide in the structures of modernity and everyday life, I argue that the discourse of singularity aestheticizes historical trauma in problematic ways" (108).

Sanbonmatsu equates singularity, aestheticization, and transcendence, warning against the inveterate harm of each. He notes, "[T]he way we often go about representing and talking about singularity occludes both the social origins, and the continuing political stakes of past traumatic events, in ways that may normalize the very structures of authority and power that give rise to extreme forms of violence" (105). According to Sanbonmatsu, the singularization consequent of the *holocaust sublime* perpetuates harmful patterns of ideology and subsequent socio-political practice that give way to violence. The singularization and aestheticization of past traumatic events, he argues, is largely responsible for repeating patterns of extreme violence throughout history. In his linear analysis, Sanbonmatsu directs attention to "the continuing political stakes of past traumatic events" (105), looking at consequences of history to motivate future resolve.

Van der Hart's and van der Kolk's culminating question of whether it is not a sacrilege of the traumatic experience to play with the reality of the past (Greenberg) is of particular importance here. The preeminent danger of Sanbonmatsu's *holocaust sublime*, according to the author, is that it "obscures, rather than reveals, the habits of thought and social structures that make genocidal practices inevitable" by "pitting the extraordinary or 'singular' against the banal and everyday" (101-102). While a rhetoric of singularity might aestheticize or decontextualize history in problematically reductive ways, so too can the banalization of history. Sanbomatsu pinpoints the danger in pitting the "extraordinary or 'singular' against the banal and everyday,"

but trauma psychology informs us that the individual's experience of trauma is both overwhelming and isolated, or rather, "extraordinary and 'singular.'" A true trauma narrative must honor the inherent incomprehensibility of the traumatic experience. This leads to the question: What forms of narrative construction have the opposite effect of banalizing trauma, reducing it to the normal schemes of mundane experience?

Rather than discount representational schemata born of the anti-realist sociological position, this article seeks to enlist the psychology of trauma to identify the unique capacities of the anti-realist mode of representation to advance past a "familiar mimetic universe" into "new regimes of knowledge" (Rothberg 4). The anti-realist mode of representation becomes a vehicle to relay the incomprehensible experience of trauma, speaking to what Caruth has introduced as the "truth of traumatic experience" (5), subsequently humanizing the actors involved.

A Brief History of What Becomes History

Sanbonmatsu's work echoes premises set forth by Frank Ankersmit's *Sublime Historical Experience* (2005). Ankersmit claims that a historical past emerges out of a separation of past and present, yet the subliminal historical experience needs to transcend the existing schism between one's relative position in a present context and history at large. He further establishes that the sublime historical experience naturally provokes the merging of certain emotions. Ankersmit's work is significant because it introduces the idea of transcendence into the context of history as colored by emotion. Ankersmit's transcendence is seen as constructive and even hopeful, whereas according to Sanbonmatsu, it is a highly contemptible and dangerous corollary of the sublime.

On Transcendence

Transcendence does not necessarily connote a singularity that threatens history. It is important to reinforce the danger in a rhetoric of singularity that aestheticizes or decontextualizes history in reductive ways. However, this article remains committed to incorporating the demands of trauma psychology into trauma representation. Rather than looking at transcendence as the epitome of dangerous singularity, it assumes the understanding that transcendence is a rather potent side effect of the experience of trauma.

Where Sanbonmatsu and Rothberg use Elie Wiesel's famous claim, "Auschwitz cannot be explained nor can it be visualized… the Holocaust transcends history" (Trivializing Holocaust), to advance their argument against anti-realist aesthetic representations, this article understands Wiesel's claim to be a consequence of elusive memory—the unavoidable concomitant of acute trauma. Wiesel's words speak to the truth of trauma. He describes the Holocaust as a sort of "*affront to understanding*" (Caruth 154)—a traumatic event, so horrific, it eludes clear and complete recall among survivors. Wiesel's claim does not speak to transcendence as exceptionalism. Rather, it suggests that the experience of trauma itself is transcendent. Placing Wiesel's claim in the context of trauma psychology, this article argues on behalf of the unique capacities of the anti-realist mode of representation—histories that do not take the form of "traditional representational schemata" (Rothberg 4) to relay the feeling of the transcendent experience of trauma. As a vehicle for relaying the transcendent truth of trauma, the anti-realist mode of representation becomes capable of promoting an "authentic moral relation to trauma" (Sanbonmatsu 105).

Wiesel's claim is merely one example that calls back the question of narrative purpose. It can be assumed that the motive of histories in the anti-realist mode of representation is not, as

Rothberg suggests, to "disable established forms of representation and understanding" (4), but to reinforce them. This is not to suggest that anti-realism should dominate the discourse about mass trauma or be presented as the preeminent account of historical atrocities, but to propose that it can be a powerful supplement to the legacy of global trauma. If the inherent incomprehensibility of the human experience inside trauma can be committed to history and engaged with emotionally, newfound understanding and preventative action can follow.

Singularity, Mimesis, and Narrative Intent

Attaching a calculated locality to the event of global trauma, Rothberg and Sanbonmatsu warn against the dangers of transcendence in its tendency to remove a subject from an awareness of their sociological position relative to the trauma. With regard to his primary example of dangerous transcendence, Sanbonmatsu states, "[R]ather than help the subject face his or her true moral and civic duties, the *holocaust sublime* may interfere with the subject's quest for an authentic moral relation to trauma" (105). The singularization of traumatic histories involves not only the decontextualization of traumatic history, but a disassociation from the event which impedes a productive relationship with the past. Sanbonmatsu establishes the discovery of an "authentic moral relation to trauma" (105) as the ultimate goal of a productive relationship to the past and this article agrees. The gravity of this endeavor cannot be understated, as it counteracts cyclical patterns of historical evils.

Singularizing history so that it becomes separate and untouchable by narrative design is harmful. Yet, the experience of trauma is singular to the person who lays claim to it. The singularity attached to the individual's experience of trauma is not by design, but is a consequence of trauma itself. As Caruth states, "[B]ecause the traumatic memory cannot be fully

integrated at the event of trauma, what remains is an experience that has *no place in history"* (153). The traumatic memory, which exists outside the schema of prior knowledge—not to mention outside of history—is inherently unique. Herein lies the great challenge of giving the singular, obscured, and repressed a means of becoming wholly transferable so that it might be related to on an authentic and moral level.

Understanding singularity and transcendence relative to trauma psychology becomes necessary so that in promoting productive relationships with the past we are not evading the truth of trauma by prioritizing narratives produced through "scientific" procedure alone. Returning to the notion that a traumatic memory is denoted by a paradoxical *elision* of memory and *precision* of recall (Caruth 153), it can be understood that if the truth of trauma is to be relayed, it must honor the trauma's quintessential incomprehensibility. The anti-realist mode of representation, not being grounded in the conventions of modernity, is of a comparable format to the elusive trauma. As a medium that is equally abstract, the anti-realist mode of representation lends itself to the encoding of obscured traumatic memories. To speak to the truth of trauma is to represent, mimetically or otherwise, the inherent incomprehensibility of the experience. Traditional representational schemata do not have the unique capacity for abstraction that, intrinsically, anti-real narrative modalities do. In the absence of the ability to reflect how a trauma was experienced, we run the risk of banalizing trauma, reducing it to mere statistics. The unique capacity of non-traditional representational schemata to relay the "truth of traumatic experience" (Caruth 5) becomes an essential means of wholly representing and engaging with traumatic histories on an authentic and moral level.

Trauma as a Type of Transcendence

Where Sanbonmatsu has attached a negative connotation to that which is subliminal, this work will invoke a rather different understanding. Transcendence is not necessarily the antithesis or evasion of a truth determined by 'scientific' procedure; rather, it characterizes the truth of trauma. In contrast to truths determined by 'scientific' procedure, the truth of trauma—the more obscured, incomplete, incomprehensive iterations of an un-integrated experience—is more difficult to relay. The anti-realist mode of representation, because of its lack of 'scientifically' determined structure, malleability of form, accessibility, and mimetic capabilities, becomes a vehicle for relaying the truth of trauma. These less traditional narrative archetypes also promote an authentic and moral relationship to the past.

In her chapter "The Kantian Sublime and Greatness of Mind," in *The Measure of Greatness: Philosophers on Magnanimity* (2019) edited by Sophia Vassalou, Emily Brady asserts, "I—and many others—interpret the Kantian sublime as an aesthetic experience which brings about an *awareness* of one's moral capacities. It is through that very encounter with something great that imagination is expanded and…. one becomes aware of just what resources one possesses as a human being, namely the freedom which lies at the heart of moral capacities" (204). Though it contradicts Sanbonmatsu's determination of the sublime, Brady's interpretation echoes Sanbonmatsu's criteria for a productive relationship with the past—the development of an "authentic moral relation to trauma" (105). This allows us to begin thinking, in theoretical terms, of the sublime and by extension, of transcendence as an "aesthetic experience which brings about an *awareness* of one's moral capacities" (Brady 204) or rather, how it may "help the subject face his or her true moral and civic duties" (Sanbonmatsu 105). When applied to trauma psychology, established by the likes of Claud Lanzman, Cathy Caruth, and Sigmund Freud, the inherently

illusory, obscured, incomprehensible experience of trauma can be understood as a type of transcendence in and of itself.

The Truth as it *Seemed*

Caruth poses the question of how we might commit the "truth of traumatic experience" (5) to history. She speculates that the danger of integration "may lie not in what [the mode of representation] cannot understand, but in that it understands too much" (154), ultimately failing to honor the inherent incomprehensibility of the experience. A narrative that effectively captures the truth of trauma must reflect its inherent incomprehensibility, and non-traditional representational schemata have been designated as uniquely equipped for this. However, the truth of truth itself has yet to be explained. According to O'Brien:

> In any war story, but especially in a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed… The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterwards, when you go tell about it, there is always a surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which, in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed.* (68)

Arguably, there is no better definition than this of the "truth of traumatic experience" (Caruth 5), nor a better contemporary example of implementation. O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story" is a short story within *The Things They Carried* (1990), an award-winning novel that chronicles the horrors of the Vietnam War from the perspective of an American war journalist inside combat, which the author was. "How to Tell a True War Story" is a powerful use of double entendre. The culminating moment comes when O'Brien reveals to his reader—whom he has guided through the tragic and fatal story of a beautiful young soldier—that none of it is true. As in the case of this war story, his war story, O'Brien writes, "A thing may happen and be a total

lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth" (80). That is the truth of trauma. It is "the truth as it *seemed*" (O'Brien 68). O'Brien understands that "absolute occurrence is irrelevant" (80) because the experience of trauma exists outside of logic, outside of time, outside of 'scientific' means of substantiation, and beyond the rendering capability of traditional representational schemata.

Since emotion exists in a part of the brain that cannot register continuity, empathy, then, becomes an accomplice to the achievement of productive connection to abstract trauma representation. The power of O'Brien's work lies in its capacity to make the audience feel. O'Brien writes in a narrative form which places his audience inside the story, meeting them with all the bias and gravity of the events at hand. His *new journalism* reporting manufactures a simulation of the trauma as it *seemed*, serving as an effective mimesis of a traumatic war experience. Through this non-traditional narrative form, O'Brien fosters a relationship to trauma predicated on empathy, inspiring an "awareness of [the subject's] own moral capability" (Brady 204).

Productive Functions of the Anti-realist Mode of Representation

Sanbonmatsu argues for producing and consuming global trauma narratives that place historical traumas within the "structures of modernity" (103) rather than lead the consumer to view them as transcendent exceptions to it. This argument presents the question of what cannot and should not be represented. In her *Serious Play: Representation of The Holocaust Between Humor and The Sublime* (2006), Ruth Liberman introduces the idea that by invoking the sublime within Holocaust narratives, many artists have entered the realm of the "ridiculous" or "absurd."

Liberman coins the term "carnivalesque sublime" to denote the threshold of humor as a device of transcendent storytelling.

Rather than attempt to quantify the impact of anti-realist narratives on the viewing subject, this article seeks to identify the productive functions at play within this narrative modality. The mimetic capacity and malleability of non-traditional representational schemata break from stringent 'scientific' productions and highfalutin language that can bar narrative consumption within the realist mode of representation. Subsequently, non-traditional representational schemata offer access to the content of traumatic experience. Laurie Vickroy elaborates on this in her *Reading Trauma Narratives: The Contemporary Novel and the Psychology of Oppression* (2015):

> Fiction plays a valuable role by depicting many of the social and psychological challenges facing us; and, aided by theories of trauma, narrative, and cognition, we can analyze the reading process and the ways these texts engage readers cognitively and emotionally. (2)

Here, Vickroy has identified fiction—an abstract narrative modality—as capable of not only revealing, but also relaying "habits of thought and social [structure]" (Sanbonmatsu 102) and concurrent implications of them. In depicting contemporary psycho-social plight, fiction, aided by theory, can reveal the power of non-traditional narrative forms "to engage [their audience] cognitively and emotionally" (Vickroy 2). Having established that a narrative relationship to trauma predicated on empathy inspires an "awareness of [the subject's] own moral capability" (Brady 204), Vickroy's analysis affirms the manner in which abstracted narrative forms can promote a productive engagement with the past. Also, notable here is Vickroy's identification of the effective interplay between fiction (the anti-real) and theory (suppositions based in science). Similarly, the anti-realist mode of representation can serve as a powerful supplement to histories produced via 'scientific' processes of documentation. It can serve as a supplement to the real.

However, there is a threshold in trauma rendering which must not be crossed. Nouri Gana elaborates on the effects and risks of aestheticization in his "Reel Violence: Paradise Now and the Collapse of the Spectacle" (2008). Gana examines the truth of trauma within the larger question of narrative purpose. Speaking to the impact of the anti-realist film *Paradise Now,* Gana states:

> By virtue of its polarizing and brokered subject matter, the film [about two Palestinian suicide bombers serving as a humanizing microcosm of occupied Palestine] was somewhat destined to court controversy, to earn the contempt of some and the appreciation of others, and in the process, to run the risk of undermining its many artistic merits. Ironically however, the controversial nature of the film is but an effect of its inaugurational artistic impulse: the elaboration of an account of suicide bombing as a narrative visualization. The narrativization of suicide bombing, the 'antinarrative' par excellence, is inhabited by two rival impulses in that it seeks to reveal to understanding what passes beyond understanding *while* sustaining intact its unthinkability. (23)

As Gana points out, *Paradise Now* is able to preserve the central paradox of traumatic experience: the *elision* of memory as juxtaposed by the *precision* of recall (Caruth 153). Taking caution of artistic endeavors with a "rationalizing impulse" (Gana 23) and noting the barbarism, according to Theordor Adorno, of trying to "make an unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning'' (2), Gana elaborates, "inversely, it is no less 'barbaric' to remain silent about this 'unthinkable fate,' to thrust it into oblivion and kill it, as it were for the second time" (23). The act of narrativizing trauma, which is often only made possible through the anti-realist mode of representation, is one which attempts to make the unthinkable accessible. Without that effort to commit the truth as it *seemed* to narrative form, the inherent incomprehensibility—the most humanizing aspect of trauma—is lost.

It is important, however, that any new ideas or feelings that the consumer might have as a result of engaging with anti-realist accounts of the "truth as it *seemed*" (O'Brien 68) do not breach the uncrossable boundaries that exist between those who experienced trauma and those who bear witness to it. Sanbonmatsu quotes Claude Lanzman, saying of the Holocaust that "'it erects around itself… a circle of flames, a limit which cannot be breached because a certain absolute is intransmissible; to claim to do so is to make oneself guilty of the most serious sort of transgression'" (104). Abstracted simulations of traumatic experience are, by the very nature of their fiction, incomparable to the "absolute occurrence" (O'Brien 80) of trauma. Sanbonmatsu accounts:

> Mary McCarth condemned John Hersey for his essay in the *New Yorker* about Hiroshima, on the grounds that it reduced a singular, unrepresentable event to mere reportage—by 'minimizing the atomic bomb by treating it as though it belonged to the familiar order of catastrophes—fire, flood, earthquakes—which we have always had with us.' Hersey's reliance on interviews with survivors, McCarthy felt, amounted to 'an insipid falsification of the truth of atomic warfare,' since '[to] have done the atomic bomb justice, Mr. Hersey would have had to interview the dead.' (103)

In terms such as these, we might begin to understand what Caruth terms the "essential incomprehensibility of trauma" (Caruth 153). The reality of "absolute occurrence" (O'Brien 80) when the occurrence is a traumatic one is that of absolute incomprehensibility. Neither simulation nor translated emotion dare claim to be that particular intransmissible absolute (Sanbonmatsu 104) which is experienced by the victims of trauma alone.

Representing the Real

When it comes to relaying a truth that is "truer than the truth" (O'Brien 80), the parameters by which we gauge narrative viability are largely undefined, highly variable, and even more contested. There are certain distinguishable dangers in the act of aestheticizing past trauma; remaining silent however, is even more barbaric. Despite a lack of controllable schemata or distinguishable parameters for narrative construction, we must commit traumatic experience to aesthetic form. The anti-realist mode of representation serves as a vehicle for this effort. To translate trauma into accessible representational form, we must move beyond singularity, but we must also move beyond the paradox of the spectacle, which, according to Gana,

> has installed in us two contradictory sociopolitical maladies: an impulsive cynicism toward the visual (whether because of its mimetic unreliability or insidious conditioning forces) combined or alternating with a reluctant cognizance of its ineluctability, or, worse still, its indispensability in a worldwide society that Guy Debord had characterized as the 'society of the spectacle.' It is necessary therefore, to pinpoint and affirm the many ways in which film might mobilize the visually enchanting aura of spectacle in order to envision and elaborate new corridors to a historical reality that might, ironically, be no longer recognizable if it were to be 'walked through' firsthand, that is, without the sheltering, balmy, and even desensitizing mediation of the screen. (21)

Vickroy provides the distinctions of cognitive and emotional connection (2) to indicate effective engagement with aesthetic iterations of trauma. Where cognitive and emotional connection have been achieved, empathy emerges in the absence of first-hand experience. Imagination also emerges, or at least awakens, in the absence of first-hand experience, and serves as an instrument of connection to traumatic experience. A prime example of this is Abu-Assad's *Paradise Now* (2005), which, according to Gana,

> reopens the corridors of distant empathizing and shakes awake the intoxicated slumbering of sobering imaginative impulses. *Paradise Now* treads the line between interpreting and understanding suicide bombing, ensuring that these independent complementary and simultaneous hermeneutic tasks do not slither accidentally into the moral abyss of justifying 'terror-ism.' The film makes use of cinematic conventions (e.g., the thriller genre and camera malfunctions) in order to undo the spectacle of terror-ism and to articulate a more nuanced and challenging narrative of Palestinian nationhood. (22)

Gana speaks to a moral abyss which exists at the junction of interpreting and understanding. The parameters for producing a productive relationship with the past have been well established. Certain unbreachable limits of trauma representation have also been identified and discussed.

There is one narrative element that has yet to be addressed. It is a high-stakes distinction which must be placed at the heart of trauma representation: "the allocation of humanity" (Gana 25). To inflict differential "allocation of humanity" (Gana 25) amongst subjects within the trauma narrative is to commit a transgression of the gravest nature. It is a contribution to the "habits of thought and social practice which make genocidal practice inevitable" (Sanbonmatsu 102). To this end, a successful trauma representation can be measured, primarily, through its capacity to humanize. In regard to *Paradise Now*, an example of *new realism* in Arab Cinema, Gana states, "Pro-Palestinian and Pro-Israeli reviewers, alike, have managed to agree that the problematic nature of the film revolves around the mutually exclusive 'humanization'/'dehumanization' of both Palestinians and Israelis, as if either were inherently more or less human" (24).

Examples in the Anti-realist Mode of Representation

My article leans into the power of abstraction to occupy space in storytelling that is left in the wake of a "history that… has no place" (Caruth 153). Certain examples of trauma narratives emerging from the anti-realist sociological position will be enumerated here to further exemplify how an author might reproduce an unspeakable atrocity and how one might convey details of a traumatic experience which are lost to repression. While the aesthetic examples listed here chronicle relative iterations of the truths of certain global traumas in the span of history, they do not claim to represent a history of global trauma.

Thomas P. Anderson in his *Performing Early Modern Trauma from Shakespeare to Milton* (2006) argues "significant cultural loss alters normative modes of expression and representation" (3), and therefore, anti-realist modes of representation are a byproduct of historical trauma. John Young arrives at a similar conclusion in his *How to Revise a True War Story: Tim O'Brien's Process of Textual Production* (2017). In a close examination of the many iterations of O'Brien's preliminary work, Young finds that when cycling through realist and anti-realist iterations, what emerges is a story that refuses to settle into a complete or stable form. Young summarizes his work stating, "in their lack of textual stability, these variants across different versions enact for O'brien's readers the kind of narrative volatility that is key" (Young) to the narratives which emerge from historical trauma.

In his analysis of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969), Jerome Klinkowitz follows the author into the void of the unspeakable, identifying the fragmented episodes as a "system rather than an entity" (87) which, when registered as a combination form the crux of the story, communicated the unspeakable firebombing of Dresden. Vonnegut's fragmented writing mirrors the fragmentation of traumatic memory, simulating, in its own way, the paradoxical *elision* of memory and *precision* of recall (Caruth 153). In her "How to Tell a True War Story:

Metafiction in The Things They Carried" (1995), Catherine Calloway deepens Klinkowitz's argument, proposing that thrusting a reader into an arena where they have to form connections between schisms of time, space, and truth, forces their participation and therefore an emotional engagement with the traumatic mimesis and history.

The Paintings of Frederick Terna

I feel it necessary to include the work of Holocaust survivor, artist, scholar, and friend Frederick Terna to exemplify the unique capacity of the anti-realist mode of representation to relay the truth of trauma. Born in Vienna, Austria on October 8, 1923 Fredrich Terna survived four concentration camps including Dachau, Theresienstadt, and Auschwitz. Fred was liberated in 1945. He was the only surviving member of his family. Evading military conscription into the Czech army, Fred and his first wife Stella fled to Paris in 1946 using counterfeit passports. In Paris, Fred informally studied Cubist and post-Impressionist painting. In 1952, they arrived in New York.

Fred began to draw when he was a prisoner at Theresienstadt, but transitioned to paint as his primary medium after liberation. As stated in the biography on his website, frederickterna.com:

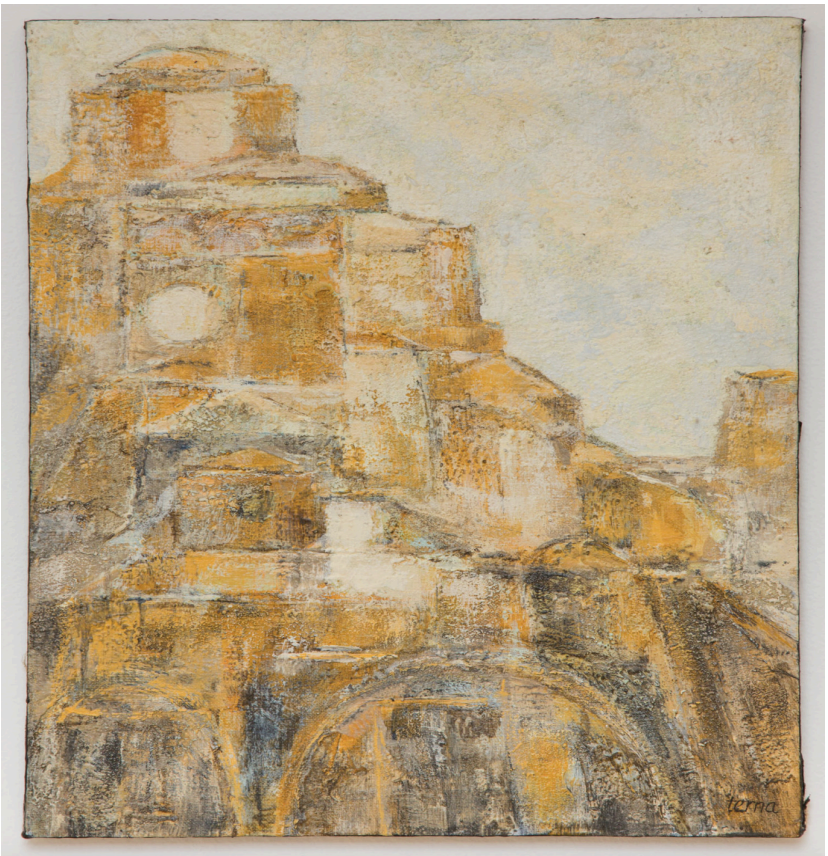
> After eventually settling in New York in 1952, Terna elaborated on the prevailing modes of Abstract Expressionism with a personal style that infused textural elements into his compositions. Using folded canvas, sand, and pebbles, Terna sought to activate the tactile senses, layering fields of depth and creating visual tricks. Terna's canvases seek to address the psychological space of trauma, often incorporating the charged symbols of chimneys and ash to abstract effect. (Terna, 2024)

Fred's painted rendition of the Temple Mount calls back to one of my first and fondest interactions with him. The walls of Fred's home are adorned with a lifetime of work. The nails with which the paintings are mounted bear more than just the weight of their canvases. They carry the weight of Fred's experience of the Holocaust and life in its wake—stories encased in pigment. In a body that lacked the same strength as his steadfast spirit, Fred guided me to one particular painting off the front entrance of his Brooklyn home. The work had a calming palette of creams, tans, and yellows. "Do you know about the Western Wall?" he asked me. "Yes," I replied. "Gates are a big part of my work. Within the Western Wall was the Temple Mount, a palace that is described in Jewish text. Now they have a pretty good idea of what it looked like, but back then—in prehistoric times—nobody knew… except for me." I smiled. "So, I painted it from imagination," he said. I walked closer to the painting looking for the walls that he described, but I couldn't seem to find them. "By painting the palace," Fred said, "I opened up the gates."

Circles are an important and recurring symbol in Fred's work. According to him, a circle, in its purest form, is a womb: safe. Antithetically, Fred claimed, the darkest and most corrupt form a circle can take is an encampment. Fred shared that the circles in his paintings play host to souls housed inside.

I met Fred in 2019. He passed away in December 2022 at the age of 99. I had the rare privilege of not only developing a productive relationship with the past Fred embodied, but also developing a friendship with Fred. I got to sit across from him at the kitchen table sharing coffee, sharing laughter, and learning from him. We discussed the Holocaust, Palestine, relationships, religion, and life. At the end of our first meeting, Fred said, "I only ask one thing and it's that you

share these stories with your children and grandchildren. If you do that, then we will have reached seven generations since the Holocaust."



(Terna, 2018)

Conclusion

There is a Latin proverb, "verba volant scripta manent." It translates to "(spoken) words fly away, written ones remain." Mortality is the inevitable reality of the human condition and thus the inevitable reality of the animate relics of trauma. My time with Fred now exists only in memory, but his art and the feelings inherent to his work prevail. They exist at the junction of what has transpired on a mass scale, his singular experience of trauma, and future implications of our engagement.

In response to the seminal question of how to represent the truth of global trauma, this article arrives at a Hegelian dialectic of trauma representation. The mutual contradiction between the two primary modes of trauma representation can be reconciled through the understanding that we find our way to the real through the anti-real. This synthesis represents a relationship with the past, whereby we can achieve a cognition and emotional connection to the truth of trauma as holistically represented through the real and the anti-real in tandem. According to Caruth:

> The attempt to gain access to a traumatic history, then, is also the project of listening beyond the pathology of individual suffering, to the reality of a history that in its crises can only be perceived in unassimilable forms. This history may speak through the individual or through the community, which in its own suffering…. may not only be the site of its disruption but the locus of a 'wisdom all its own." (16)

The unassimilable representational forms that make the truth of trauma perceptible remain where their creators do not. By acting as host to the truth of trauma, the anti-realist mode of representation also acts as host to the psychology and emotion that humanizes historical mass trauma, inherently counteracting cycles of hate and harmful social practice.

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