

*Routledge Research in American Literature and Culture*

# **TRAUMA, GENDER AND ETHICS IN THE WORKS OF E.L. DOCTOROW**

María Ferrández San Miguel



# Trauma, Gender and Ethics in the Works of E.L. Doctorow

This project approaches four of E.L. Doctorow's novels—*Welcome to Hard Times* (1960), *The Book of Daniel* (1971), *Ragtime* (1975) and *City of God* (2000)—from the perspectives of feminist criticism and trauma theory. The study springs from the assumption that Doctorow's literary project is eminently ethical and has an underlying social and political scope. This crops up through the novels' overriding concern with injustice and their engagement with the representation of human suffering in a variety of forms. The book puts forward the claim that E.L. Doctorow's literary project—through its representation of psychological trauma and its attitude toward gender—may be understood as a call to action against both each individual's indifference and the wider social and political structures and ideologies that justify and/or facilitate the injustices and oppression to which those who are situated at the margins of contemporary US society are subjected.

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María Ferrández San Miguel

First published 2020  
by Routledge  
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Ferrández San Miguel, María, author.

Title: Trauma, gender and ethics in the works of

E.L. Doctorow / María Ferrández San Miguel.

Description: New York, NY : Routledge, 2020. |

Series: Routledge research in american literature and

culture | Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Summary: "This project approaches four of E. L. Doctorow's  
novels—Welcome to Hard Times (1960), The Book of Daniel  
(1971), Ragtime (1975), and City of God (2000) from the  
perspectives of feminist criticism and trauma theory"—  
Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019058638 |

ISBN 9780367236274 (hardback) |

ISBN 9780429280870 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Doctorow, E. L., 1931–2015—Criticism

and interpretation. | Doctorow, E. L., 1931–2015—Ethics. |

Doctorow, E. L., 1931–2015—Political and social views. |

Psychic trauma in literature. | Sex role in literature. | Literature  
and morals. | Literature and society.

Classification: LCC PS3554.O3 Z64 2020 | DDC 813/.54—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019058638>

ISBN: 978-0-367-23627-4 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-429-28087-0 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon  
by codeMantra

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# Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the many people who in various ways have made the completion of this book possible. First and foremost, I am deeply indebted to Francisco Collado Rodríguez, who not only provided crucial critiques of the manuscript in its early stages that were essential to the final form of the book, but has also been a source of expert guidance and constant support over these years. Without his help and encouragement I could never have written this book. Also invaluable in this process has been Carmen Pérez-Llantada Auría, whose kindness and support have always been an inspiration. I furthermore extend my heartfelt gratitude to the members of the Contemporary Narratives in English Research Team at the University of Zaragoza for stimulating discussions on the topic, and in particular to Susana Onega Jaén, Mónica Calvo Pascual, Sonia Baelo Allué, Silvia Martínez-Falquina and Silvia Pellicer Ortín for their generous mentorship.

I am indebted as well to Gordon Henry, of Michigan State University, and Sonya Andermahr, of the University of Northampton, who kindly welcomed me in their institutions and offered generous feedback and engaging discussions in the early stages of this project. The anonymous readers for Taylor & Francis gave me insightful critiques and valuable suggestions, for which I am very grateful. I would like to thank the editorial staff at Taylor & Francis for their help and work on the different stages of the manuscript. Last but not least, thanks are due to the Spanish Ministry of Education for granting me a fellowship to begin the first version of this book, and to the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Technology and the Aragonese Government for financial support for research stays, permission costs and travel bursaries toward a number of conferences, for all of which I am truly grateful.

On a personal level, I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to my partner Ángel for his good humor, unconditional affection and continued encouragement through these years. I cannot even begin to thank you for never doubting that I can accomplish whatever I set out to do. Thanks also go to my parents, Inma and Manolo, who inspired in me an early passion for stories and taught me the value of hard work and resolve. Finally, I extend my gratitude and appreciation to Pablo, Nines,

viii *Acknowledgments*

Jose, Marina, Marco, Alfredo and Pili for their warm affection and generosity.

I also thank those who have given me permission to reprint excerpts from previously published material:

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Portions of the following chapters appeared in slightly different form in previously published essays and are printed here with permission. An earlier and shorter version of Chapter 3 originally appeared in *Orbis Litterarum* 73.2 (2018): 146–169, under the title “Towards a Theoretical Approach to the Literature of Resilience.” An earlier and shorter version of Chapter 4 originally appeared in my chapter “‘No Redress but Memory’: Holocaust Representation and Memorialization in E.L. Doctorow’s *City of God*,” in *Memory Frictions in Contemporary Literature*, edited by María Jesús Martínez-Alfaro and Silvia Pellicer-Ortín (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

# Introduction

Beginnings are usually hard, and when E.L. Doctorow began his career as a writer, back in the 1960s, not many critics could foresee that he would become one of the most relevant and widely acclaimed contemporary novelists of the United States. In fact, his first two novels tended to be praised by reviewers but were generally disregarded by academic critics (Williams 60). Things started to change with the astonishing critical and commercial success of *Ragtime* (1975), Doctorow's fourth novel. Its popularity and the subsequent interest that it elicited among critics and scholars led to a reexamination of his previous novels. From then on, Doctorow's fame as a writer only continued to grow. He is widely celebrated for the versatility, audacity and originality of his fiction, whose subversive power and stirring passion leave no one indifferent. An incorrigible fabulator, he loved playing games with his readers. His works are located in the unstable position of stories that frequently question their own truth while still affirming their possibility to teach readers valid ethical lessons for the times we live in. Indeed, if anything can be said of Doctorow is that he was, above all, a firm believer in the power of literature to influence culture and improve society.

A true fictionist from an early age, in a certain sense Doctorow started his literary career as a child: in a public seminar with Joseph Papaleo—chairman of the Department of English at Sarah Lawrence College—Doctorow explained that, as a junior at the Bronx High School of Science, he took a course on journalism where the students were given an assignment to do an interview. He submitted an interview with Carl, the stage doorman at Carnegie Hall, a lovable old man who had a broad knowledge of musical literature, wore worn-down shoes and was a refugee from the Nazi genocide with a strong accent whom all the artists knew and loved. The teacher was deeply touched and greatly impressed by young Edgar's work, and suggested taking a picture of the kind doorman and publishing the interview in the school newspaper. Running out of excuses why the doorman could not be photographed, Doctorow finally admitted that he had made the whole thing up, which earned him a trip to the principal's office and an early understanding of the power of fiction to touch people's lives and souls (Nieman Reports 16, Navasky 60).

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By the time of his death, fifty-five years after starting his career as a professional writer, he had published twelve novels, three short story collections, a play and four volumes of essays, leaving behind a literary legacy that has earned him a reputation as one of the most important American literary figures of the past half century. As the *Washington Post's* literary critic David Segal put it, "Doctorow [...] occupies one of the narrowest subsets in American letters: the million-selling author who is taken seriously" (n.p.). He has been called the "epic poet of America's past" (S. Kaplan n.p.), and praised as "a visionary who seeks in time past occasions for poetry" (Updike 295), as a "[l]iterary time traveler [who] stirred past into fiction" and as "one of contemporary fiction's most restless experimenters" (Weber n.p.). Upon his death, President Barack Obama paid tribute to him as "one of America's greatest novelists" (bbc.com n.p.).

### E.L. Doctorow: Life, Works and Criticism

Edgar Lawrence Doctorow was born on January 6, 1931 in the Bronx, the son of Rose and David Doctorow, second-generation Americans of Jewish-Russian origin. His father owned a music store in Manhattan and his mother was a pianist. He attended Kenyon College, where he majored in Philosophy and graduated with honors in 1952. Then, he completed a postgraduate course on English Drama at Columbia University, where he met his future wife, Helen Setzer. He served for two years with the US Army in Germany and, in 1954, married Helen. They had three children: Richard, Caroline and Jenny. After being discharged from the army, Doctorow found work as a reservations clerk at La Guardia Airport and subsequently as a script reader for CBS Television and Columbia Pictures in New York.

Doctorow began his literary career in 1960 with *Welcome to Hard Times*, a post-Western, while working as senior editor with the New American Library. This first novel was a response to the poor-quality scripts that he had reviewed as script reader for CBS Television and Columbia Pictures. He moved onto Dial Press in 1964, where he became editor-in-chief. In 1966 he published *Big as Life*, a science fiction novel that never satisfied readers, publisher or the author himself, who did not allow it to be reissued. While working on his third novel—*The Book of Daniel* (1971), a historical fiction inspired by the Rosenberg case—Doctorow was offered a post as writer in residence at the University of California, Irvine. This was the first of a number of teaching appointments that he achieved throughout his life, including positions at Sarah Lawrence College, Utah, Princeton and New York University, where he held the Loretta and Lewis Glucksman chair of English and American Letters until his death. *The Book of Daniel* granted Doctorow a reputation as a respected novelist. Yet, critical and commercial success did not

come together until 1975 with the publication of *Ragtime*, a historical fiction set in New York during the Ragtime Era. In the following years, he wrote an experimental play—*Drinks before Dinner* (1979)—and began to articulate his innovative views on narrative in a number of essays, among them his most influential “False Documents” (1977). Four new works were published in the 1980s: the dazzling and eerie postmodern novel *Loon Lake* (1980), Doctorow’s first short story collection *Lives of the Poets* (1984), *World’s Fair* (1985)—considered by critics his most autobiographical text—and *Billy Bathgate* (1989), an unconventional gangster story that was runner-up for the 1990 Pulitzer Prize. *The Waterworks*, a Gothic-like detective story, followed in 1994. During the last fifteen years of his life, the writer published some of his most ambitious works. His end of the millennium novel, *City of God* (2000), has baffled critics with its sophisticated philosophical and spiritual concerns. His second collection, *Sweet Land Stories* (2004), together with *The March* (2005)—a historical fiction set in the last years of the American Civil War—and *Homer and Langley* (2009)—a rewriting of the life of the eccentric Collyer brothers—would follow, confirming Doctorow’s position as one of America’s most appreciated and widely read contemporary writers. The title of his last collection of short stories, *All the Time in the World* (2011), seemed to foresee a long list of books to come, but it would only be followed by *Andrew’s Brain* (2014). Doctorow’s last novel, considered by some to be the odd one out, continues to puzzle readers with its unconventional narration, which offers the possibility to peek inside the mind of a cognitive scientist.

Written over the course of five decades, Doctorow’s fiction has garnered numerous prizes and honors, such as three National Book Critics Awards (for *Ragtime*, *Billy Bathgate* and *The March*), the National Book Award (for *World’s Fair*), two Pen/Faulkner Awards (for *Billy Bathgate* and *The March*), the National Humanities Medal, the PEN/Saul Bellow Award for Achievement in American Fiction, the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, the American Academy of Arts and Letters Gold Medal for Fiction and the Library of Congress Prize for American Fiction, among others. His work has been translated into more than thirty languages. It has also been adapted into five films and a Broadway musical. Doctorow’s readiness to experiment with different narrative genres and the intense social and historical concerns of his fiction draw the portrait of a very distinctive author from other writers of his period. He passed away on July 21, 2015, at the age of eighty-four, following complications from lung cancer.

E.L. Doctorow’s *oeuvre* has been object of steady academic interest since the early 1980s. Several book-length critical analyses dealing with Doctorow’s work have been published over the last two decades. First, we have a number of volumes which compile the most provocative scholarly articles written on Doctorow’s fiction at the time of their publication

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(Trenner 1983, Friedl and Schulz 1988, Morris 1999, Siegel 2000, Bloom 2002). Second, several introductory books have been written which provide comprehensive academic introductions to Doctorow's oeuvre (Levine 1985, Harter and Thompson 1990, Parks 1991, Fowler 1992). These works follow a survey approach and offer summaries and critical readings of Doctorow's novels and short stories which consolidate and extend issues already explored in scholarly essay format. Finally, there are a number of monographs which have approached Doctorow's work from a specific framework of analysis (Morris 1991, Tokarczyk 2000, Walker Bergström 2010). To these book-length analyses, a number of academic articles published in international journals must be added, which have provided focused readings of Doctorow's fiction. Some of the issues that have recurrently captured the critics' attention have been Doctorow's conception and deployment of history, his political vision, his relationship with Jewish culture and his distinctly postmodern narrative style. His fiction has been approached from perspectives as varied as historiography, sociology, postmodernism, psychoanalysis, Marxist criticism and deconstruction, among others. Taken together, this body of criticism not only confirms Doctorow's firm position within the US literary canon; it also provides a solid foundation on which to build the present study.

#### Corpus of Analysis

Of Doctorow's extensive *oeuvre*, this project focuses on four of his novels: *Welcome to Hard Times* (1960), *The Book of Daniel* (1971), *Ragtime* (1975) and *City of God* (2000). The reasons for selecting these are varied and wide-ranging. While very dissimilar in narrative style, setting and plot, these books share a number of common key features. First, they deal with central episodes of the history of the United States—namely the colonization of the West, the social unrest of the Ragtime Era, the political crisis of post-war North America and the spiritual and ideological drift of the turn of the millennium. As such, the four novels map the progression of history from the years of the forging of the nation to the end of the twentieth century, while simultaneously undermining the humanist notion of endless historical progress and mocking our natural inclination toward nostalgia. Second, as we shall see shortly, the four novels are inspired by the postmodernist spirit of subversion and skepticism as well as owing much to postmodernist aesthetics, on account of their experimentalism, metafictional concerns, intertextuality and complex attitude toward history, reality and fiction, among other features. However, the novels simultaneously share a strong commitment to some sort of realism and stage a return to the position of the subject and its relation to the Other, thus avoiding the ultimate epistemological skepticism and pervasive relativism usually associated with the postmodern ethos.

Last but not least, the four novels collectively paint a vivid picture of the ills of North-American society, and they explore similar human dilemmas and experiences. Apart from their engagement with common concerns, their postmodernist allegiances and historical themes, the books have been selected on account of their versatility and openness to a wide variety of readings. As we shall see, *Welcome to Hard Times*, *The Book of Daniel*, *Ragtime* and *City of God* are among the most highly crafted and provocative novels that the US author produced, generating as they have lively debates and encouraging a myriad of literary interpretations. Finally, their interest also lies in the fact that they offer a deep insight into Doctorow's literary project, mapping the author's narratological and ideological evolution throughout his literary career.

### Initial Hypothesis, Aims and Structure

This study springs from the assumption that Doctorow's literary project is eminently ethical. In other words, the initial hypothesis that lies behind this book is that *Welcome to Hard Times*, *The Book of Daniel*, *Ragtime* and *City of God* have an underlying social scope. This crops up through their overriding concern with injustice and their engagement with the representation of human suffering in a variety of shapes. In order to test such thesis, this study will concentrate on the novels' representation of psychological trauma on the one hand, and on their attitude toward gender on the other. With the help of narratology and close reading—which are the main methods of enquiry—my goal is to determine the specificities of the novels' commitment to these concerns, for which I will resort to the analytical tools provided by two key critical frameworks: trauma studies and feminist criticism. Ultimately, the aim will be to provide a new and better understanding of the ethical impulse in Doctorow's novels. With this purpose in mind, the collusion of the novels' ethical and postmodernist allegiances will also be explored. This pursuit will additionally seek to reveal Doctorow's attitude toward the social meanings of literature and its potential to promote ethical and empathic responses to the suffering of others on the part of the readers.

This book is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 focuses on E.L. Doctorow's debut novel, *Welcome to Hard Times*, a historical fiction set in the Dakota Territory in the 1870s, following the discovery of gold. The chapter draws on some key Freudian concepts and notions from classical trauma theory as well as on recent theories about shame and guilt and their connection to trauma and violence to analyze the psychological condition of the main protagonists. The chapter also explores the limits between the trauma categories of victim, perpetrator and bystander. Another central focus of enquiry is the novel's representation of masculinity and femininity and its attitude toward power relations, oppression and gender dialogue. *Welcome to Hard Times*, I will argue, establishes a

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tight connection between the aftereffects of trauma and the subversion of hegemonic gender configurations, and provides critical commentary on some of the ills of postwar North America: its fierce individualism, its hegemonic gender configurations and its lack of empathy, emphasizing their impact not only on the individual but also on the community.

Chapter 2 concentrates on *The Book of Daniel*, a fictional rendering of the conviction and execution of a communist couple—inspired in the Rosenbergs—from the viewpoint of their surviving son. This chapter investigates the novel's thematic and formal exploration of the psychological aftereffects of childhood trauma, drawing on some key notions from classical and second-wave trauma theory. I also set out to examine the representation of traumatic memory and the novel's attitude toward the power of narrative as a healing mechanism. From the perspective of feminist criticism, this chapter analyzes the novel's articulation of female otherness and gender violence, as well as its degree of openness to the perspectives of women. A related focus of enquiry in this chapter is the book's undermining of the traditional character-logic and its encouragement of alternative forms of reader identification. The novel, it will be claimed, seeks to warn of the disastrous consequences of psychological trauma for the individual, who might eventually end up becoming a perpetrator. It further exposes a number of social, economic and political structures as mechanisms of oppression that have a strong traumatizing potential, and advocates readers' duty to bear witness to the suffering of the Other.

Chapter 3 analyzes *Ragtime*, a historical fiction set in New York which tells the story of the encounter of three families—one WASP, one Jewish immigrant and one African-American—who interact with a number of historical figures and participate in some of the most transcendent events in North-American history at the turn of the twentieth century. This chapter examines the novel's thematic and formal representation of psychological trauma and the psychosocial phenomenon of resilience, assessing the potential of traumatic experiences to act as a transformative force. It further draws on Freud's theorization of sublimation, Maria Root's notion of "insidious trauma" and some key postcolonial theorists' criticism of what they perceive as serious shortcomings of classical trauma theory. Another focus of enquiry is the novel's representation of gender identity and dialogue, and its emphasis on the intersecting nature of oppression. This chapter also explores the novel's explicit adherence to a number of second-wave feminist concerns. My claim is that *Ragtime's* engagement with the traumatizing potential of racism, gender discrimination and injustice plays a crucial role in Doctorow's denunciation of how certain legal, social and economic structures may generate and perpetuate the victimization of the underprivileged and disenfranchised, while emphasizing resistance and drawing attention to the collective nature of oppression.

Chapter 4 focuses on *City of God*, a *sui generis* collection of skillfully interwoven plots and voices that create a kaleidoscopic universe of alternative ontological levels. Drawing on key theories for the analysis of Holocaust fiction, the main focus of this chapter is the novel's treatment and attitude toward the Holocaust with regard to issues of memory and representation. My analysis is further supported by Peter Novick's exploration of the "Americanization" of the Holocaust and Marianne Hirsch's notion of "postmemory," as well as by current notions about Jewishness and Jewish identity. The novel, I contend, approaches the Holocaust through a self-conscious discussion of the problems and limits of its representation, while emphasizing the problematics of ranking atrocities and denouncing human barbarity and capacity for evil. The chapter also explores the novel's representation of gender models and roles, and its attitude toward voice. It is argued that *City of God* carries out a quest for a form of spirituality that is appropriate for the twenty-first century and constitutes an outcry against injustice and a call to memory and ethics.

These chapters are followed by two closing ones. Chapter 5 discusses the wider implications of Doctorow's literary project on the basis of the results obtained in the analytical chapters. It first explores the collusion of the novels' ethical and postmodernist allegiances, for which Magali Cornier-Michael's concept of "impulse" will be taken up. Returning to the initial hypothesis from which this project sprang, Chapter 5 also considers whether literature is a suitable vehicle for ethics and whether it may have a political dimension. A discussion of readers' possible reactions to the novels' ethical and political invitations will follow, for which I will rely on a number of theories about reader response. Another focus of enquiry is the notion of narrative empathy. Finally, Emmanuel Levinas's theory of the infinite responsibility toward the inaccessible and radically different Other, and Jill Bennett's call for a conjunction of affect and critical awareness will be taken up to discuss the novels' potential to encourage critical awareness and intellectual distance while also inspiring powerful emotional and ethical responses. Chapter 5 is followed by a Conclusion chapter which outlines this study's main results.

## Theoretical Framework

Trauma studies have acquired great relevance for cultural and literary studies in recent times, achieving the status of a solid theoretical framework for the analysis of literary texts. For obvious reasons, providing a fully detailed genealogy of trauma is well beyond the purposes and scope of this project, and has, furthermore, been more than adequately accomplished by other scholars.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, a few introductory comments might be in order here. In its broadest definition, trauma originates from a physical and/or psychological wound that leaves long-term

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mental scars on the survivor. It is an individual response to dramatic events whose intensity affects normal emotional or cognitive functioning and may result in temporary or long-lasting psychological disruption. Although at first trauma was mainly associated with physical and, then, psychological injuries and was, therefore, the exclusive concern of medical professionals and researchers, it has now become a critical paradigm that has deeply affected contemporary sociology, anthropology, history, literature, culture and critical theory.

Issues of trauma started to receive prominent critical attention in the 1990s, after the American Psychiatric Association officially acknowledged the phenomenon of psychological trauma and defined the effects of a new illness that would come to be known as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.<sup>2</sup> PTSD, first included in the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, encompassed the symptoms of what had previously been called “shell shock,” combat stress, delayed stress syndrome and traumatic neurosis, and referred to delayed responses to an overwhelming, life-threatening event outside the range of human experience (American Psychiatric Association, DSM-III 236). This definition, however, soon began to be challenged by a number of medical professionals (see Herman 1992, Brown 1995), who argued that events such as rape, incest or child molestation are regrettably too frequent experiences so as to be considered outside the range of normal human experience, and yet have the uncontested potential to be equally traumatizing. Psychologist Laura S. Brown warned against a narrow definition of trauma that is constructed within the experiences and realities of the dominant group, advocating that “*real* trauma is often only that form of trauma in which the dominant group can participate as a victim rather than as the perpetrator or etiologist of the trauma” (102; emphasis added). Thus, the realization that the first definition of PTSD was somewhat narrow led a number of voices to call for an understanding of the traumatic event as owing its traumatic quality not to its nature, but to the person’s reaction to it. Consequently, the fourth edition to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, DSM-IV-TR 463–468) was modified to rely more on the person’s subjective perceptions of fear, threat or helplessness, and on the effects of witnessing as much as suffering the traumatic event.

From the grounds of critical theory, scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Geoffrey Hartman—prominent Yale literary scholars who were influenced by Derrida’s philosophy of deconstruction—inaugurated the field of trauma theory by producing and editing groundbreaking studies of the effects of trauma on war survivors and victims of the Holocaust, natural catastrophes, rape and childhood traumatic experiences. Trauma theory emerged in the United States at a time when, as Roger Luckhurst explains, “various lines of inquiry converged to make trauma a privileged critical category” (“Mixing Memory” 497).

What he is referring to is the connection that scholars such as Caruth, Felman and Hartman perceived and famously drew between emerging medical notions of psychological trauma and deconstructionist discourse about reference and representation, and about the limits of language and knowledge. As Luckhurst further points out, Hartman and Felman “turned from work on the undecidability of interpretation in literature to publish work on Holocaust memory and witness [...]” while “Cathy Caruth signaled that trauma as the limit of knowledge was a continuation of the Yale project” (“Mixing Memory” 497).

Cathy Caruth’s 1996 book, entitled *Unclaimed Experience*, is perhaps still today the most influential book of trauma studies, since it develops the key tenets of trauma theory as it emerged in the 1990s. It was preceded by the edited volume *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, which began to articulate Caruth’s theory of trauma and included essays by leading psychiatrists, psychologists and sociologists. Taken together, the two books set the basis for what is now considered “classical trauma theory” (Rothberg xiii).<sup>3</sup> Built upon the scientific theories of prominent psychologists and psychiatrists such as Judith Herman and Bessel van der Kolk,<sup>4</sup> and indebted to the enduring legacy of Freudian theories about the workings of the human mind,<sup>5</sup> Caruth articulated a view of trauma as amnesic, unspeakable, unrepresentable, and of belated effects. For Caruth, the traumatic experience is overwhelming in that it shatters the brain’s normal processing mechanisms. Trauma is, in her theorization, “an event whose force is marked by its lack of registration” (*Explorations* 6), not “fully owned” because it is “not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in a repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it” (*Explorations* 4–5; emphasis in the original). Indeed, in Caruth’s view, to be traumatized is to be “possessed by an image or event” (*Explorations* 5). This latent trauma,<sup>6</sup> which is temporarily absent from the survivor’s mind, eventually returns and is reenacted through flashbacks, dreams or other symptoms. Thus, the images of trauma, although accurate and precise, are largely inaccessible to conscious control (*Explorations* 151). In addition, due to the failure of the mechanisms of memory and consciousness to naturally process the traumatic experience and also owing to its aporetic nature (in the Derridean sense of the term), it becomes unspeakable, unrepresentable (*Explorations* 152).

The failure of representation that, in this classical model, characterizes trauma was famously furthered in another foundational book of trauma theory: Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1991). Like Caruth’s, Felman’s first contribution to the emerging field (with psychoanalyst Dori Laub) was also characterized by a combination of psychoanalytic and deconstructionist notions to explore the aporetic nature of some texts, of texts produced after the historical trauma of the Holocaust

in particular. In their book, Felman and Laub speak of “the *radical historical crisis in witnessing* the Holocaust has opened up” (201; emphasis in the original). In other words, they identify the Holocaust as a turning point in human history because it radically exceeds our capacity to come to terms with it, to understand it in its stark horror and disquieting unspeakability.

Geoffrey Hartman, the other leading trauma theorist within this “first wave” of criticism (Pederson 334), also started his critical career as a deconstructionist. He wrote extensively on the difficulties and limitations, but the simultaneous importance, of representing the Holocaust in literature and other cultural texts, most famously in his book *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (1996). This collection of Hartman’s own scholarly and personal essays deals with the cultural aftermath of the Holocaust, epitomizing its alienating power and the irresolvable tension that resulted from it, between the need to speak and the imperative to remain silent, between the inadequacy of language and the unbearable of giving it up. In *The Longest Shadow*, Hartman also famously claims that “[t]he role of art remains mysterious [...], for art is testimony” (52), thus inaugurating a more or less optimistic discourse regarding the role of art in representing the unfathomable horror of the Holocaust and its implications. Hartman’s work has also been largely responsible for the centrality of the Holocaust within trauma theory. Proof of that lies in the widespread insistence among trauma and Holocaust scholars on the inexplicability and unrepresentability of the Holocaust, features that have come to define all experiences of trauma as understood by classical theory.

Another central theorist in the establishment of the basic tenets of classical cultural trauma theory is the historian Dominick LaCapra. He has, like the scholars mentioned above, successfully applied psychological notions and psychoanalytical concepts to the study of Holocaust memory, while retaining a certain belief in language, reference and the possibility of representation. As Michael Roth aptly explains, “LaCapra has been adept at recognizing both the challenge of the concept of the traumatic for historical representation and the temptation of the concept for those eager to escape the constraints of some connection to the real” (xxiii). Indeed, perhaps his most useful contribution has been the drawing of a differentiation that the aforementioned critics might have failed to establish between what he terms “structural trauma” and “historical trauma.”<sup>7</sup> In his influential essay “Trauma, Absence, Loss” (1999), LaCapra defines structural trauma as related to “transhistorical absence (absence of/at the origin) [which] appears in different ways in all societies and all lives” (721–722). Historical trauma, on the contrary, is construed as “specific [since] not everyone is subject to it or entitled to the subject-position associated with it” (723). In *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), LaCapra further warns of two opposed errors:

To generalize structural trauma so that it absorbs or subordinates the significance of historical trauma, thereby rendering all references to the latter merely illustrative, homogeneous, allusive, and perhaps equivocal, or, on the contrary, to explain all post-traumatic, extreme, uncanny phenomena and responses as exclusively caused by particular events or contexts. (82)

He usefully elaborates on the distinction: “Everyone is subject to structural trauma. But, with respect to historical trauma and its representation, the distinction among victims, perpetrators, and bystanders is crucial” (“Trauma” 723). Indeed, LaCapra may be credited with inaugurating discussion on the different subject positions or categories associated with (historical) trauma and their specificities. He also famously introduced the possibility of the existence of a gray zone (*Writing History* 79)—borrowing Primo Levi’s notion—and warns about the risk of over-identification with, and wrongful appropriation of, the status of victim through vicarious victimization (“Trauma” 725). Finally, classical trauma theory owes LaCapra the introduction into its interpretative texture of the notions of “acting-out” and “working-through,” which he borrows from Freud in order to refer to “interrelated modes of responding to trauma” (“Trauma” 713): in post-traumatic acting out, “one is haunted or possessed by the past and performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes” (*Writing History* 21), whereas working through

is an articulatory practice: to the extent one works through trauma [...], one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recall in memory that something happened to one (or one’s people) back then while realizing that one is living here and now with openings to the future. (*Writing History* 22)

As this quotation reveals, despite LaCapra’s undoubtedly outstanding contribution to the field of trauma theory and his early attempts to correct the problems that he already perceived in the work of Caruth and other ‘deconstructive’ trauma theorists, his own theory manifests certain shortcomings that later critics soon began to point out, namely the emphasis on trauma’s exclusive nature as amnesic.

In more recent times, the field has continued evolving thanks to the impulse provided by some of the dissenting voices that have been raised in recent years and that are critical of what is perceived as the first wave of trauma theory’s limited focus and scope. Some have called out the depoliticization implicit in trauma studies’ excessive tendency to pathologize and psychologize socio-historical phenomena and their representation (Traverso and Broderick 9); others have attacked the classical model’s lack of self-reflexivity and its elevation of the concept of trauma into the

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status of a new master narrative (Kansteiner and Weinböck 229); others resent the exclusively Western focus of the model in terms of both focus and critical methodologies, and warn of the risks of a simplistic transposition of the model to postcolonial and other non-Western contexts (Buelens and Craps 2; Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing* 12; Radstone 24); many of these critics are also suspicious of classical trauma theory's exclusive focus on events (rather than systems) (Root 240; Craps "Beyond Eurocentrism" 49; Erikson 185). Other critics have questioned the emphasis on victims' widespread psycho-physical incapability to remember the traumatic events and talk about them (Pederson 336); Others point to the role played by other determining circumstances, such as the affects of shame and guilt to explain survivors' reluctance to talk about their trauma (Escudero 224; Roth xxii); others have called for the need to "de-provincializ[e] trauma" (i.e. by combining trauma studies with other fields and methodologies of inquiry) (Rothberg, xiv); while others have argued against its ubiquitous emphasis on the negative (i.e. pathological) consequences of trauma (Rousseau and Measham 278; Root 248) and its overshadowing of the psychobiological phenomenon of resilience (Konner 300). The work of these critics—and of many others who cannot be duly addressed due to space limitations—has contributed to shifting the emphasis away from the individual (usually Western) mind and its problems to work through trauma toward an interest in the problematic nature of extreme human suffering and its social and political implications. As Buelens et al. note (via Luckhurst, *Trauma Question* 14–15) in the Introduction to their volume *The Future of Trauma Theory* (2014), today "issues of trauma theory are characterized by a 'knot' tying together representation, the past, the self, the political and suffering" (4).

The development of trauma theory has taken place hand in hand with the rise of memory studies, a field that has also increased its size and influence exponentially in the last few years. Reflecting a broader cultural interest in memory as a phenomenon that is at once neurological, psychological, cultural and socio-political, the academic study of memory has engaged scholars from diverse disciplines who attempt to understand a subject that, as Antonio Traverso and Mick Broderick explain, seems to escape traditional disciplinary boundaries (5). Memory scholars share a common central focus on the multiple ways in which memory comes to be known and represented and, more broadly, on how the personal, social and cultural realms come to be constituted and articulated through memory.

As a result of such combined efforts, trauma studies have acquired paradigmatic relevance for theory and criticism, reaching the status of a solid theoretical framework for the study of literature. A number of literary scholars have applied the main tenets of trauma theory to the analysis of creative literature, producing groundbreaking studies of the so-called "trauma novel" (Granofsky 5). It is worth adding that most key theorists

of trauma share a belief in the privileged role of literature where it comes to giving voice to trauma.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps owing to the tight relationship that is perceived to exist between the language of trauma and the language of literature, the last few decades have seen an outstanding proliferation of novels (and other cultural products) dealing with trauma and traumatic memories. The first to notice was Ronald Granofsky, who coined the term “trauma novel” in his book *The Trauma Novel: Contemporary Symbolic Depictions of Collective Disaster* (1995) to refer to “a distinct sub-genre of contemporary fiction” (5) that had begun to emerge in the Western world after the Second World War. He identifies as these novels’ basic origin “the shock at the destructive potential in human depravity given free rein by modern technology” (11). He further claims that they “explor[e] through the agency of literary symbolism [...] the individual experience of collective trauma, either actual events of the past, alarming tendencies of the present, or imagined horrors of the future” (5). In his study, Granofsky explains that psychological trauma in the trauma novel may be defined as “a painful experience which defies assimilation and demands accommodation” (8–9; emphasis in the original). He, then, lists and explores a number of features that symbolically represent collective disaster in trauma novels, such as the abandonment of traditional categories of understanding (time, space, causality and number), a symbolic rendering of the four elements and a portrayal of the quest for identity, which is often depicted through the structure of trauma response (fragmentation, regression and reunification) (16–19). Finally, he may be credited with reminding literary critics that “we are dealing here [...] with the fictional depiction of imagined trauma” (7).

Another seminal contribution to the theorization of how contemporary literature deals with trauma is Laurie Vickroy’s *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (2002). Vickroy’s main contention is that contemporary trauma narratives are individual responses to Western culture’s emerging awareness of the catastrophic effects on the individual psyche of traumatic events such as wars, poverty, colonization and domestic abuse. According to her, “trauma narratives go beyond presenting trauma as subject matter or character study. They internalize the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of traumatic experience within their underlying sensibilities and structures,” which in her view is best achieved through experimental narrative (3). In order to prove that, she surveys the main features of trauma as described by Caruth, Felman and Laub, and Hartman and ascribes them to specific stylistic experimental techniques, such as voice shifts, repetition, aporias (textual gaps) and breaks in linear time. Interestingly, the book also discusses the effect of these stylistic devices on the reader, who becomes “witness to these kinds of stories through the unconventional narrative translations of traumatic experience and memory that give them a different kind of access to the past than conventional frameworks” (20).