

Between Wounds and Witness: Memory and the Relational Fabric of Repair

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Abstract. This editorial examines trauma as a multidimensional phenomenon – psychological, cultural, political, and embodied – that profoundly shapes individual lives and people’s sense of connection to shared histories. Situating the discussion within contemporary global crises and scholarly debates, it draws on key concepts from trauma theory, including Caruth’s understanding of trauma as “unclaimed experience”, Hirsch’s postulation of “postmemory”, and van der Kolk’s work on embodied trauma. Emphasising relationality, it explores how trauma circulates across generations and geographies, mediated through storytelling, witnessing, and affective transmission. It reflects on the limits of dominant Western frameworks and highlights the need for culturally situated approaches that account for diverse historical and social conditions. The special issue it introduces brings together scholars who explore the representation and repair of trauma through literature, testimony, historical sources, and aesthetics, foregrounding the role of narrative in fostering connection, resilience, and ethical responsibility in the face of rupture.

Keywords: trauma theory; embodied trauma; intergenerational trauma; post-memory; narrative and storytelling

Et leida sidusust ühiskonnas ja kultuuriruumis, kus me elame, võime toetuda eelmiste põlvkondade humansetele kogemustele, loomingule ja tegudele. On hetki, mil me tunneme üksijäämist ja hüljatust ning vastukaaluks leiame end olukordadest, kus kahe inimese kohtumisel hakkab elu end ise looma.¹

Imbi Paju. Kirjanduskliinik. (2023: 26)

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¹ To find coherence in the society and cultural space we inhabit, we may turn to the humane experiences, creations, and acts of those who came before us. There are moments when we feel utterly alone and forsaken, and yet, in the meeting of two people, life can begin to shape itself anew. (My translation)

In a world ruptured by war, displacement, and systemic violence, the study of trauma has never been more urgent or more contested. Trauma is, at once, an intensely personal psychological wound and a collective, cultural condition that shapes how individuals and societies remember, respond, and attempt to heal. This special issue, emerging from the 15th International Conference of the Estonian Association of Comparative Literature, *Trauma and Healing: Storying Lives, Literary Engagements, Entangled Memories*, held at the University of Tartu in June 2023, brings together scholars from diverse cultural contexts to explore trauma in its full complexity not only as an individual experience of rupture, but also as a political, aesthetic, and ethical phenomenon that demands sustained, situated attention.

This complexity makes trauma a necessarily contested concept. It is shaped by tensions between clinical and cultural understandings, between psychological interiority and social memory, and between established Western theoretical models and diverse experiences shaped by specific cultural and historical contexts. Foundational trauma theory, particularly grounded in psychoanalysis and Holocaust studies, has been crucial in forming the field, yet its universal applicability has increasingly been called into question. At the same time, the range of experiences recognised as traumatic continues to widen. Beyond the catastrophic and overtly violent, trauma is now increasingly located within the contexts of personal and everyday life, including the still-too-often hidden realities of domestic violence, social marginalisation, and systemic oppression. Scholars and practitioners alike are making sustained efforts to bring these quieter, less visible forms of trauma into view. Additionally, a growing body of work now attends to trauma resulting from large-scale social, natural, and cultural phenomena – such as climate anxiety, environmental collapse, and natural disasters – that profoundly affect individual and collective wellbeing.

These shifting understandings intersect with contemporary global crises. Ongoing wars in Ukraine, Israel/Palestine, and Iran have devastated the lives of millions, most of them civilians whose everyday worlds have been violently upended. These conflicts not only inflict massive suffering, they also challenge the ways trauma is defined, represented, and addressed. In this context, trauma can no longer be contained solely within the vocabularies and frameworks inherited from previous generations. It must be critically revised and reconceptualised through new, inclusive approaches that account for its cultural embeddedness, political conditions, and uneven global visibility while remaining attentive to the affective, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions of both suffering and survival.

Over the past few decades, trauma has emerged as a dominant lens through which culture, memory, and history are interpreted, not solely because of its

clinical or psychiatric roots, but, even more importantly, due to its moral and socio-political resonance. Trauma has evolved into a potent cultural category, invested with ethical significance, particularly in the ways societies frame their responsibilities toward vulnerable populations and engage with histories of suffering on both national and global scales (Davis and Meretoja 2020: 3; Fassin and Rechtman 2009: 284; Sütterlin 2020: 17). While academic discourse often distinguishes between individual psychological trauma and broader collective or cultural trauma, such lines are frequently blurred. These conceptual distinctions often prove inadequate in the face of complex, large-scale events that resist neat categorisations, prompting scholars to suggest a more fluid, continuum-based approach to understanding trauma. Initially, trauma studies foregrounded the victim as the central figure in narratives of harm and historical injustice. However, more recent scholarship has expanded this framework to critically examine the roles of complicity, guilt, and the figure of the perpetrator, underscoring the need for more nuanced ethical considerations. (Adams and Vice 2013: 1–2) At the same time, there is increasing awareness that the designation of victimhood is itself shaped by socio-historical contexts and infrastructures of recognition, which are not universally accessible. For some individuals or communities, adopting the position of ‘trauma victim’ can feel limiting or even counterproductive, highlighting the need to critically examine how victimhood is constructed and deployed across different contexts (Davis and Meretoja 2020: 5; Kurvet-Käosaar 2012: 91–91). The identity of the victim can also be mobilised or constrained depending on social power dynamics, and in some cases the role of the trauma victim can be co-opted or weaponised in ways that complicate or hinder genuine healing (Chouliaraki 2024).

This critical expansion has coincided with the widespread cultural uptake of trauma in popular media, literature, and commemorative practices, what some have termed a “trauma boom”. This proliferation has led to concerns about the commodification and trivialisation of trauma, as narratives of suffering are widely circulated for public consumption, entertainment, or even profit (Seltzer 1997: 4; Miller and Tougaw 2002: 2; Yaeger 2002: 29; Craps and Bond 2020: 3). Yet trauma remains deeply embedded in the construction of collective identities, often serving as a foundational element of national or ethnic memory. Scholars such as Roger Luckhurst (2008: 119) and Andreas Huyssen (2003: 8) have argued that historical trauma shapes the memory frameworks of the twentieth century, influencing how communities relate to their past. Moreover, mediated narratives of traumatic experience, particularly autobiographical or testimonial in nature, can contribute not only to personal coping but also to the collective reparation of social bonds, influencing political discourse, memory politics, and legislation (Miller and Tougaw 2002: 2–3). When

such mediation fails and traumatic events are silenced or misrepresented there is a risk that patterns of historical violence could be unconsciously reproduced (Davis and Meretoja 2020: 1; Gilmore 2008: 367). Despite trauma theory's broad cultural impact, critiques persist regarding its theoretical limits, especially its heavy reliance on Western historical events and psychoanalytic paradigms. As a result, scholars have increasingly called for a rethinking of trauma theory that accounts for cultural specificity and the diverse ways in which societies across the globe process and represent traumatic experience (see, for example, Schaffer and Smith 2004: 20–22; Bennett and Kennedy 2003: 4–11).

Trauma, as Cathy Caruth famously says, is an “unclaimed experience”, locatable only “in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely no known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on” (1996: 4). It is neither fully remembered nor forgotten; it haunts the survivor in repetitive flashbacks that attempt to “master what was never fully grasped in the first place” (Caruth 1996: 62). This latent dimension highlights trauma's capacity to disrupt chronological narrative and profoundly alter how individuals perceive reality, as well as their sense of a coherent self. Yet Caruth is emphatic that trauma cannot remain isolated within the individual. Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman, pioneers of trauma testimony studies, affirm that trauma is fundamentally relational, emerging through the dialogical process of bearing witness. They emphasise that healing begins not in solitude but through the act of bearing witness: “For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be bonding, the intimate and total presence of *an other* – (original italics) in the position of one who hears” (Caruth 1992: 70). This dialogical encounter enables the survivor's fragmented experience to be held and validated, thus interrupting the isolating effects of trauma. Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, which she defines as “as a *structure* (original italics) of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic recall and embodied experience” (2012: 6) that consists of “forms of remembrance that reconnect and re-embody an intergenerational memorial fabric that is severed by catastrophe” (Hirsch 2012: 32) builds on this relational dynamic by demonstrating how descendants of trauma survivors inherit and imaginatively engage with experiences they did not directly live through. These second-generation memories, transmitted through stories, images, and affective atmospheres, produce deep emotional identification and sustain the afterlife of trauma across generations. In a broader, more collective frame, Meg Jensen discusses how shared storytelling functions as a generational, performative act symbolically and rhetorically mediating traumatic experience to shape collective identity and support community-level healing (Jensen 2019: 202).

If trauma emerges dialogically and circulates across generations and communities, it also inscribes itself onto the body and is expressed through affective and performative registers. Bessel van der Kolk argues that traumatic memory is not merely a narrative deficit but a somatic imprint: “trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body [that has] ongoing consequences for how the human organism manages to survive in the present” (2014: 34). This bodily encoding of trauma complicates the assumption that healing can be achieved solely through verbal articulation. Diana Taylor’s distinction between the archive and the repertoire sharpens this point, showing how trauma can be transmitted and remembered through embodied acts – gestures, rituals, movement – that exceed linguistic expression (Taylor 2003). These embodied performances, passed on across time and space, carry the affective weight of trauma in forms that are simultaneously public and intimate. Sara Ahmed’s (2004) concept of “affective economies” further reveals how emotions do not reside solely within individuals, but circulate between bodies, texts, and institutions, “sticking” to certain subjects and signs. In the context of collective trauma, such as war, displacement, systemic violence, affects such as grief, fear and anger accumulate and reattach, shaping communal responses and political imaginaries. Together, these perspectives underscore the multisited nature of trauma as it moves between individual, intergenerational, embodied, and affective domains.

Although mainly developed in the late twentieth century within specific historical and cultural contexts, these theoretical frameworks remain critically relevant today, offering tools for interpreting trauma across personal, cultural, and political domains. In a world marked by overlapping crises – armed conflict, environmental catastrophe, and many forms of structural violence – trauma theory offers valuable tools for interpretation, though it now encounters new limits. Concepts such as Caruth’s unclaimed experience, Felman’s notion of the witness, Hirsch’s postmemory, van der Kolk’s emphasis on embodied memory, Taylor’s repertoire of performative knowledge, Ahmed’s theory of affect, and Jensen’s insights on collective storytelling together form a rich framework for thinking about how trauma operates across personal, political and cultural domains. These theories help account for what is remembered and forgotten, spoken and unspoken, individual and collective, especially in contexts where traditional narratives and categories fall short. As Estonian writer and filmmaker Imbi Paju, who has consistently emphasised the need to confront the traumatic legacies of Soviet repression to foster healing and interrupt intergenerational transmission, reminds us in the quote that opened this introduction, the moments of connection between individuals where life

and hope emerge amid isolation are essential for overcoming trauma's isolating effects. Rather than discarding these frameworks, the task now is to revisit and extend them, shaping new vocabularies that can speak to trauma's evolving and expanding forms.

This special issue emerges from that crucible. It brings together literary and cultural scholars who trace trauma's reverberations through personal narratives, collective histories, contested memories, and aesthetic forms. Whether rooted in domestic spaces or diasporic displacements, in political persecution or intergenerational silence, the articles in this special issue ask: How can trauma be storied, and how might such storytelling create paths to healing?

This issue seeks to expand the scope of trauma studies by interrogating both its theoretical foundations and its cross-cultural applicability. Traditional paradigms, which are grounded in psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and post-structuralist theory, have often privileged Western modes of subjectivity and expression. But what of trauma in postcolonial, post-socialist, or Indigenous contexts? How do differing cultural repertoires shape the way trauma is processed, remembered, and potentially healed? These questions animate a wide range of responses across this issue from Akvilė Naudžiūnienė's exploration of Holocaust memory in the Lithuanian-American diaspora, shaped by ideological fracture and ethnic defensiveness, to Marisa Kërbizi's tracing of how Albanian lyrical poetry emerged as a counter-archive to totalitarian erasure and repression.

Several contributors foreground the embodied aesthetics of trauma, highlighting how sensory, affective, and formal elements reveal trauma's complex experience beyond verbal narration. In Esther Kinsky's novel *Rombo*, as Marko Pajević elucidates, trauma emerges through fragmented memory and the profound geological metaphor of the abyss, or *abissi*, beneath the earth and how it becomes a symbol for the hidden depths of psychic pain. Kinsky's intertwining of natural phenomena with cultural memory reflects how trauma, like an earthquake-caused chasm, disrupts the stability of both the environment and the self. The novel's use of fragmented narratives, interspersed with photographs, scientific observation and folklore, suggests that trauma is not simply something to be remembered or forgotten but something to be actively pursued and transformed. This "abissology" demands confrontation with trauma's subterranean traces to prevent destructive collapse and foster renewal. Complementing this literary exploration, Merilin Jürjo approaches trauma through the lens of clinical psychology, focusing on drama's unique capacity to externalise inner suffering and facilitate therapeutic reflection. Using plays like Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* and Heneliis Notton's *Emesis*, Jürjo shows how theatre can represent symptoms of trauma and depression with authenticity and intensity,

offering audiences a space to engage with otherwise stigmatised mental health struggles. Drama not only mirrors psychological states but also creates possibilities for psychoeducation and healing by fostering empathy, dialogue and understanding in both individual and collective contexts. This embodied aesthetic of trauma, where the sensory and performative enactment invites witness and response, underscores the transformative potential of art in trauma resolution.

Others consider how healing begins in the relational act of witnessing. Whether through literature, theatre, film or testimony, the presence of an audience – someone who listens, believes and stays – can initiate the slow restoration of connection, what Judith Herman calls the reintegration of the self into a meaningful human context (1992: 197). Andreas Athanasiades' work is emblematic of this approach, exploring the transformative potential of public storytelling in healing collective trauma. Using his mother's experience as a case study – she is a Cypriot refugee displaced by the 1974 Turkish invasion – Athanasiades examines how the shift from private to public narration of traumatic memories facilitates healing by creating a collective witness. This process enables projective identification, a form of communication and psychological change, fostering a new, more resilient collective self made up of individual fragments that helps his mother heal from the trauma. Edlira Tonuzi Macaj likewise analyses Zef Pllumi's *Live to Tell* trilogy as a confessional, documentary form of memory work that testifies not only to the horrors of Albania's communist regime but to the sustaining role of faith in the long arc of survival and healing. Beyond its historical testimony, *Live to Tell* offers a therapeutic perspective on Albania's communist past by revealing suppressed truths that aid both personal and collective healing. It underscores the necessity of remembering painful experiences as a vital step toward recovery. Thus, the trilogy not only preserves cultural memory but also fulfils an ethical role in bearing witness, something that is crucial to addressing historical trauma and building communal resilience.

This issue further explores how collective selves emerge from trauma and fragmentation. Akvilė Naudžiūnienė's study of Holocaust memory within the Lithuanian-American diaspora reveals a complex negotiation between remembrance and identity. In the decades following World War II, the community's memory was fractured by competing perspectives, some rooted in peaceful coexistence narratives, others shaped by direct trauma and political upheaval. This dynamic resulted in polarised discourses oscillating between acknowledgment of Jewish suffering and defensive nationalism. The analysis highlights how collective trauma is mediated through external pressures and internal contestations, underscoring the difficulties of communal reconciliation and the

politics of cultural memory in diasporic contexts. In post-communist Albania, Marisa Kërbizi examines the resurgence of lyrical poetry as a crucial medium for articulating and healing national trauma. Under the totalitarian regime, socialist realism suppressed artistic freedom, marginalising lyrical voices. Following the regime's collapse, poetry re-emerged as a vital form of expression that confronted the emotional devastation of dictatorship and repression. This literary revival challenged official historical narratives and fostered a dialogic process between past and present, transforming personal wounds into collective remembrance and resilience. Flóra Várkonyi's analysis of *Ilmatilaa* by Kashmeera Lokuge and Hype Salmi highlights the racialised traumas of Shehani, a Sri Lankan migrant in Finland. Drawing on trauma fiction and emotion studies, Várkonyi demonstrates how Shehani's experiences of racism and her emotional responses function as adaptive tools, illuminating the social injustice underpinning her suffering. This portrayal evokes empathy and deepens understanding of both personal trauma and systemic oppression, showing how trauma intersects with broader cultural and political dynamics.

Collectively, the contributions to this volume elucidate trauma as a phenomenon that transcends individual experience, emerging through complex relational, embodied, and cultural dynamics. While some authors, such as Andreas Athanasiades and Edlira Tonuzi Macaj, foreground the pivotal role of collective witnessing and public testimony in processes of healing, others, including Marisa Kërbizi, Flóra Várkonyi, and Akvilė Naudžiūnienė, attend to the ways trauma informs and is negotiated within communal memory, identity formation, and socio-political narratives. Complementing these perspectives, Marko Pajević and Merilin Jürjo illuminate the embodied and affective registers of trauma, demonstrating how artistic representation and narrative can facilitate spaces for both individual and collective reflection and transformation. Together, these diverse approaches affirm that the representation and resolution of trauma constitute fundamentally relational acts engendering new modalities of recognition, resilience and intersubjective connection.

In resonance with the theoretical frameworks advanced by cultural memory scholars Jan and Aleida Assmann (2006; 2011) and sociologist Kai Erikson (1995: 183–199), this assemblage of scholarship reveals trauma as a contested and reimagined site of communal expression. The ethical imperative of bearing witness, fostering empathy and engaging critically with legacies of suffering emerges as indispensable not only to individual recuperation but also to collective reconciliation and the reconstruction of social bonds. Ultimately, this volume invites a reconsideration of trauma's reverberations not as irrevocable fissures but as openings to renewed meaning, communal solidarity, and healing.

We offer this issue – the first of two special issues of *Interlitteraria* on trauma and healing – as an invitation to keep listening, witnessing, and thinking together across borders, disciplines and histories as we navigate the porous boundaries of trauma and the uncertain yet vital terrain of healing.

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