Chapter 13
Ecologies of Trauma

13.1 Where Trauma and Culture Meet

Where do trauma and culture meet? Over the past three decades, the study of cultural trauma has been moving along two major paths: there is, first, the broad and diversified field of what Lucy Bond and Stef Craps (2019) call "cultural trauma studies"; and second, the more clearly defined sociological theory of "cultural trauma" (Eyerman 2019). The former has its roots in an early 1990s dialogue on psychoanalysis and poststructuralist theory that was conducted by scholars affiliated with Yale University, including Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Geoffrey Hartman (see Caruth 1996; Felman and Laub 1992). Cultural trauma studies has since brought forth many different branches, such as Marianne Hirsch's (2012) "postmemory," as well as critiques of "trauma culture" (Luckhurst 2008) and important forays into forms of transcultural trauma by Stef Craps (2013) and Michael Rothberg (2009, 2019). The sociological theory of cultural trauma, on the other hand, goes back to a research group at Stanford University in 1999–2000, involving, among others, Neil Smelser, Ron Eyerman, and Jeffrey Alexander, who all work with the concept of cultural trauma from a social constructivist viewpoint.

While cultural trauma studies have never lost sight of trauma as a psychic injury—yet tend to focus on its cultural, mediated, and socially shared dimensions—the sociological theory of cultural trauma is based on a strict distinction between individual and collective levels. It puts an emphasis on trauma as social construction. For Jeffrey Alexander (2012, 101), "collective traumas are reflections neither of individual suffering nor actual events, but symbolic renderings that reconstruct and imagine them." Cultural trauma is, according to Neil Smelser's (2004, 44) definition, "a memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group."[1]

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[1] Smelser's (2004, 44) full definition is: "a memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event or situation which is (a) laden with negative affect,

As Smelser's wording suggests, and as trauma scholars like Craps, Rothberg, and others have shown, research on cultural trauma—no matter in what particular variation—can be located within the larger field of memory studies and tends to be seen as a specific form of cultural memory. But this does not make matters any simpler, as the definition of both concepts is a subject of ongoing and heated discussion.[2] It is from this broader memory studies perspective that this chapter aims to tackle what appear to be unresolved questions about cultural trauma: Where do trauma and culture meet? How do we address trauma as physical, psychic, and cultural phenomena in one framework? How do we navigate between individual and collective levels without making category mistakes? How can we usefully integrate recent research on the extended mind and on memory ecologies and assemblages into the study of cultural trauma? What is the significance of narrative templates in the traveling and translation of trauma across time, media, and social scales? Last but not least, what is—and what should be—the role of "collective identity" in research on memory and trauma?

Admittedly, this is a veritable odyssey of conceptual questions, and it will be fittingly attended by tracing the *Odyssey* as a narrative template: I will follow Homer's perennial story as a powerful cultural tool for expressions of trauma across time and space, drawing on examples ranging from antiquity to the present day.[3]

13.2 Toward an Assemblage Model of the Extended Mind

Proliferating research on cultural trauma across diverse disciplines has contributed to a more general understanding of what this chapter describes as "ecologies of trauma": the insight that traumata—from the individual trauma addressed by psychotherapists to the so-called collective trauma studied by sociologists—are experienced, felt, perceived, understood,

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(b) represented as indelible, and (c) regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions."

    [2] For overviews of cultural trauma studies, see Leys (2000), Bond and Craps (2019).

    [3] As the Homeric question remains unresolved to this day, I use the term "Homer" to refer to what was most probably an oral tradition turned into the written epics *Iliad* and *Odyssey* during the seventh century BCE. Throughout, I will discuss the narrative agency of the *Odyssey* as told in the Homeric poem, not taking into account other narrative traditions (such as the counternarratives by Dares and Dictys, or Dante's particular version of Odysseus; see Stanford 1963 [1954]); see also Erll (2024a); and Chapter 3, "Homer—A Relational Mnemohistory."

negotiated, and healed within sociocultural, spatiotemporal, and human-nonhuman contexts.[4]

But is such an integrated vision, as suggested by the term "ecologies of trauma," advisable at all? Or will considering both individual *and* collective dimensions of trauma invariably mean reintroducing what Jeffrey Alexander so successfully dispensed with: the problematic conflation of a person's psychic injury with political memory and questions of representation? This "category mistake" was astutely observed by Wulf Kansteiner (2004) in post-structuralist trauma theories arising in the wake of Cathy Caruth's influential *Unclaimed Experience* (1996). Alexander follows the path of radical social constructivism when he emphasizes the strict separation of individual and collective levels and their different logics:

> *Individual* victims react to traumatic injury with repression and denial, gaining relief when these psychological defenses are overcome, bringing pain into consciousness so they are able to mourn. For *collectivities*, it is different. Rather than denial, repression, and "working through," it is a matter of symbolic construction and framing, of creating stories and characters, and moving along from there. (Alexander 2012, 3)[5]

Or, reformulated in the words of systems theorist Elena Esposito, "from the functioning of the brain and consciousness *nothing* can be deduced regarding the functioning of society" (Esposito 2002, 18; my translation and emphasis). Indeed, thinking in simple analogies can be highly misleading when it comes to an understanding of trauma in individual and collective dimensions. The same goes for memory more generally. Memory studies is not an exercise in finding correspondences between processes on different scales, as in a "great chain of (mnemonic) being"; it is not a neat Renaissance-style relationing of microcosm and macrocosm, even if terminology such as "*cultural* trauma" and "*collective* memory" may suggest just that.

But if no analogies can be drawn between individual and social levels, why use the term "cultural *trauma*" at all to capture what appears to be quintessentially a politics concerning negative emotional memories?

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[4] On "memory ecologies," see Hoskins (2016). More broadly, on the environmental or ecological turn in collective memory studies, see Gülüm et al. (2024)

[5] Kansteiner (2004, 186) maintains that "nations can repress with psychological impunity: their collective memories can be changed without a 'return of the repressed.'"

Why describe social processes using a concept that was developed with a view to psychic phenomena? (In fact, why further metaphorize what is already a metaphor, as the term "trauma" was originally used just for physical wounds?) The wording chosen by the sociological strand of cultural trauma theory seems to assign affective and emotional states, as well as cognitive agency, to representations and collectivities (for example, when Alexander maintains that cultural trauma leaves "indelible marks" on "group consciousness"[6]). Philosopher Robert A. Wilson (2005) warns that "by attributing cognitive agency to things that merely have functional agency, we magnify or heighten our sense of what those agents can do." This leads to a fundamental question of cultural trauma research: What does the "cultural" actually do?

Of course, these are general questions that memory studies at large has continually been confronted with. Perhaps a broader memory studies perspective may therefore be helpful in addressing them. Many scholars maintain that collective or cultural memory is *not* a mere metaphor. But how exactly the relation between "memory in the head" and "memory in the wild," to use a phrasing suggested by Amanda Barnier and Andrew Hoskins (2018), should be conceptualized is the subject of ongoing debate.

Arguably, the problem could in the first place be the very distinction. Referring to Jeffrey Olick's influential discussion of "collected memory" versus "collective memory" (1999), which has done a lot to chart the multidisciplinary field of memory studies, William Hirst and Charles B. Stone (2015, 105f.) argue that such a separation of spheres unnecessarily implies an "ontological distinctiveness."[7] They claim that "when the mind is appropriately conceptualised, . . . the distinction between collective and collected memories collapses"—with the effect that everybody (the sociologist, the psychologist, the neuroscientist, the art historian) is dealing with "simply one memory." But what does "appropriate conceptualization" mean? Hirst and Stone refer to the "extended mind" and, pointing to Gregory Bateson's example of the blind man with a cane, they ask "why not go beyond the

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[6] This is part of Alexander's (2012, 6) definition of cultural trauma: "Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways."

[7] Indeed, Olick (1999, 336) claims that these are "radically distinct ontological orders." But I see Olick's distinction rather as perspectives on, or roads into, the field of memory studies: either via the phenomenon of the mind-that-collects or via public symbols—or: via bottom-up or top-down approaches, as Hirst et al. (2018) argue. But both spheres are deeply interconnected, and indeed each is unable to produce memory without the other (see Erll 2011a, 97–98).

surface of the skin and include the cane" when explaining how the blind man navigates his way through the world? Theories of the extended mind consider how the social and material world always plays into cognition, how memory is produced in complex ecologies made up of inner and outer resources.

In their work on the extended mind, the philosophers and psychologists Sutton et al. (2010, 524) address the vexed question of how to relate individual and collective, inner and outer, cognitive and social dimensions of memory. In doing so, they make a useful distinction between two options of understanding this relation, delineating "two primary routes to extended cognition." The first assumes "*complementarity* of disparate inner and outer resources," and the second "*parity* or functional equivalence of neural and external components."

Thinking of memory in terms of parity of levels implies thinking in analogies, and this will generate all kinds of epistemological problems. There just is no functional equivalence or "isomorphism" (Sutton et al. 2010, 525) between such different levels as the biological and the social, or the medial and the mental. They may be connected in the production of memory, yet each will operate according to its own logic.

But how can we account for the remarkable, often seemingly miraculous, similarities between levels? Images of the past are constructs (no matter how true to the past events they may seem to be), and this has been shown both for the neuronal level and for media culture. Both for individuals and for societies, narrative memory serves to construct a sense of identity. And as far as traumatic memories are concerned, although social constructivism warns us against making such linkages, it seems that not only individuals but also groups have a tendency to "act out" a past that has not been "worked through." This was argued by Sigmund Freud in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), where the psychoanalyst imagined the murder of an Egyptian Moses by the Israelites as the original but repressed sin of the Jewish people, passed down through the generations as an inheritance of guilt and trauma, and it is a common way of thinking about transitional societies—in Latin America, South Africa, Eastern Europe, and elsewhere.[8]

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[8] Studying the Moses myth from Egyptian antiquity to Freud, Jan Assmann (1997) has shown how the "return of the repressed" across the *longue durée* follows a complex cultural logic with mental, material, narrative, and social aspects: An event such as Akhenaten's new monotheistic religion possibly causes multiple individual traumatizations among people living in Egypt in the fourteenth century BCE. It is subsequently officially censored, but stories of trauma are unofficially passed on

But these surprisingly analogical patterns may have more to do with the inherent connectedness of individual minds with their larger environments than with a miraculous synchronicity of otherwise disparate systems. While the idea of *parity* will inevitably lead to category mistakes, thinking of such phenomena in terms of *complementarity* might be a route toward understanding memory (including traumatic memory) as extended across diverse dimensions of a complex ecology.

In other words, the complementarity approach paves the way for an understanding of memory as emerging from relations between biological, mental, material, medial, and sociocultural phenomena. Rather than entities placed on hierarchical levels, these diverse phenomena might better be conceived of as elements in constellations of an extended mind. Drawing on an emerging discussion in memory studies and tapping the conceptual repertoire of actor-network theory (ANT), they are "mnemonic actors" within a "flat ontology of memory"—parts of what Red Chidgey calls a "memory assemblage" (Chidgey 2019).[9]

But what is a memory actor? First of all, it is an actor that never acts alone. Memory is a relational process, or in the words of Donna Haraway (2016, 61), a case of "sympoiesis"[10]; from the paper and ink we use to memorize lists of words to the way parents help children in scaffolding their autobiographical memory, and to the interplay of objects, infrastructures, and people in the creation of an archive. In ANT, as Annemarie Mol (2010, 257) explains, the "semiotic understanding of relatedness" inherited from Saussure, structuralism, and poststructuralism "has been shifted on from language to the rest of reality." Elements in a memory assemblage are related to, connected

through the generations. These remain "dislocated" as they are not part of, and cannot be integrated with, canonical memory. They emerge again and again, and attach themselves to events and persons (like Moses and the Jews) that had not been part of the historical events in the first place.

[9] "To take a note from Latour, scales of memory do not move from the personal-local-national-global, getting increasingly larger and more complex. Instead, multiple scales and sites occupy and inhabit every assemblage as forces that work in concert, proximity and conflict with each other" (Chidgey 2019, 11). Hirst and Stone (2015, 106) suggest a need to "take a systems approach, in which memorising and remembering occurs within a system that includes individuals, and the environmental and social context." Actor-network theory is such a "systems approach," but one that does not fall back into cloudy concepts of "the cultural" or "the social"; is immune against thinking in analogies *and* the strict separation of elements assigned to different ontological levels; and at the same time helps conceptualize objects, archives, and landscapes not as mere *ancillae* to individual remembering but as mnemonic actors in their own right.

[10] "Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing" (Haraway 2016, 58). According to Haraway, "M. Beth Dempster suggested the term sympoiesis for 'collectively producing systems that do not have self-defined spatial or temporal boundaries. Information and control are distributed among components'" (Haraway 2016, 61). As the "partners do not precede the relatings" in such systems, "relationalities *are* the objects of study" (Haraway 2016, 64).

with, other elements, and only as part of such associations can they become mnemonic actors. In this view, the prefrontal cortex, an affect-laden flash-back, the dyad of husband and wife, the knot in the handkerchief, the book, and the screen of a digital device can all be seen and studied as actors. An actor is, according to Latour, "any thing that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference" (Latour 2005, 71). Agency, for Latour, does not derive from one actor alone, but from the "actor-network." An actor is there-fore only "what is *made* to act by many others" (Latour 2005, 46). Actors in the perspective of ANT do not necessarily have cognitive agency, inten-tionality, affect, emotion, and responsibility, but they are functional parts of a network. The emphasis placed by ANT and new materialism on what Jane Bennett (2010, ix) in *Vibrant Matter* calls and theorizes as "*distribu-tive* agency" helps reconceive what has been seen as ontologically distinct vertical planes (biological, individual, and social dimensions of memory) as actants on *one* horizontal plane, within *one* ontology, and *one* ecology of memory—acting together, albeit according to different logics.

This perspective not only enables us to see Bateson's blind man and his cane as an actor-network, but also makes us consider the particular logic and agency of the cane within this network. This strengthening of the material is an important way of tackling the risk of extended mind-approaches "looping back to the self again" (Barnier and Hoskins 2018, 387). In the perspec-tive proposed here, statues and libraries surely don't "have" memory, but they can have mnemonic agency as parts of a memory assemblage. Memory emerges from associations of biological, mental, social, and material actors in particular assemblages. Such assemblages are transient and need to be continuously performed, or they will dissolve.

ANT and new materialism make it possible to frame the emergence of memory as an effect of relationalities, entanglements, or intra-action.[11] These approaches thus enable a better understanding of the "extended mind" within complex memory ecologies.[12]

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[11] See Karen Barad (2007, ix): "To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. . . . Individuals do not pre-exist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating."

[12] This perspective also resonates with Stef Craps's call for "memory studies to start to think ecologically (rather than merely socially)" (Craps et al. 2018, 500). While Craps is interested here in the Anthropocene, a move from the mental to the social (via the transcultural) to the ecologi-cal is also implied in uses of the term "ecological" in psychological and media memory research (Graumann 1986; Hoskins 2017). Memory emerges from and needs to be located within complex ecologies that include immediate social and material environments, digital and other media, as well as human-nonhuman and nature-culture complexes.

Let's come back to cultural trauma. In the perspective suggested here—memory emerging from mnemonic assemblages in a flat ontology—the "cultural" of cultural trauma no longer need be discussed either as "some force behind" trauma or as a traumatized supra-individual consciousness. Instead, the focus can turn to how particular cultural phenomena work with other entities as an "actor-network," and how traumatic memories and memories of trauma emerge from these relations in "ecologies of trauma."

13.3 Narratives as Actors: Following the *Odyssey*

Representation—and narrative representation in particular—holds great significance in all theories of trauma. It is through forms of narrative that trauma is mediated, discussed, healed, and possibly also transferred, shared, or vicariously experienced. Narrative resources play a key role in trauma studies—all the way from Freud's emphasis on narrative healing to the poststructuralist suspicion of all-too-simple, harmonizing narratives (and the concomitant emergence of fragmented trauma fictions), and eventually to the sociological focus on how groups imagine cultural trauma into being by creating "narratives about social suffering" (Alexander 2012, 2).

According to anthropologist James Wertsch (2002, 2021), narrative templates are tools of collective memory. They are also tools of expressing and understanding trauma, or "actors," in the sense of ANT. Drawing on Latour's (2005, 11) imperative to "follow the actors" and "trace actors' new associations," this chapter asks: What happens when we follow narrative patterns as "mnemonic actors" that are used to frame a past-that-continues-to-hurt? What happens when we study how they travel and are translated across different dimensions in ecologies of trauma—from individual to group, from fictional character to nation, from medium to mind, from the local to different regions, across languages, and across time?

The following discussion will draw on one of the oldest narrative templates for framing individual and collective traumas of displacement—an odyssey. Tracing the odyssey template across different times, places, media, and collectivities will, first, show how Homer's *Odyssey* is used as an ancient narrative resource for modern trauma therapy. Second, asking how claims about traumatization are rhetorically moved from individual to collective scales leads to discussing the *Odyssey*'s significance for the articulation of

diaspora as "cultural trauma." Third, problematizing identity positions in trauma discourse shows how Homer's *Odyssey* already imagines transcultural trauma and leads to asking why, in today's art and media culture, the odyssey template is frequently used to frame the traumata of refugees. The chapter ends with a critical discussion of the notion of "collective identity," that seemingly indispensable—but arguably rather detrimental—companion to all thinking about cultural trauma and collective memory.

13.4 Combat Trauma, Ancient and Modern: Jumping with Homer

Clinical psychoanalyst and bestselling author Jonathan Shay is not afraid of time-jumps. In his books *Achilles in Vietnam* (1995) and *Odysseus in America* (2002), he conducts close readings of the Homeric epics *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (both from the seventh century BCE), and draws analogies to American soldiers returning from Vietnam and other theaters of war. Like Achilles, they suffer most from betrayals by their commanders and the loss of their closest comrades. Like Odysseus, they have to face long "trials of homecoming."

Traumatization of soldiers in war (variously called shell shock, war neurosis, combat fatigue, or PTSD) has constituted a significant empirical foundation of trauma theory in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is also a case in point for an understanding of ecologies of trauma. Each war seems to have generated its own version of soldiers' trauma. Veterans of the First World War showed different symptoms (such as paralysis of limbs) than those of the Vietnam War (nightmares, flashbacks), and their problems were named and treated differently. Apparently, different times and different sociocultural and military contexts produce different types of trauma. What this suggests is that there might be a "changing same"—a tendency of soldiers to become traumatized in battle, with culturally distinct manifestations of such traumatization: ecologies of trauma.

However, using a 2,700-year-old narrative to understand contemporary veterans' traumata seems like a rather bold stroke. Does Shay commit major category mistakes between different ontological, temporal, and cultural levels by using literature as evidence for real-world psychological processes, by drawing analogies between the archaic and the modern period, between

ancient Greeks and present-day Americans? Of course, Shay's is unmistakably a mode of reading myths that has a long tradition in the field of psychoanalysis, going back all the way to Freud (for example, to his readings of the Oedipus myth). But cross-cultural research on trauma has challenged such universalizing notions of trauma and human nature. Drawing on the work of anthropologist Allan Young, Bond and Craps (2019, 106) remind us that while "trauma tends to be thought of as a timeless, acultural, psychobiological phenomenon, . . . it is actually a discursive invention that arose in a particular historical context." Trauma is tied to modernity and the West, cultural trauma studies suggest. But, if we follow Shay, it can be found in places as remote as ancient Greece.

These different standpoints on the relativity or universality of trauma as psychic process are probably unresolvable. But as a particular memory assemblage, the use of the *Odyssey* in current post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) therapy is an interesting example of the transtemporal dynamics, or "cross-temporal networks" (Felski 2011, 577), of narrative in the conception and healing of trauma. It shows how age-old templates can travel across time and space, and then be put to use as "actors" in present situations to do their therapeutic work—quite regardless of whether they were intended as trauma narratives in the first place, or even referred to actual traumatic experience. Conversely, traveling on to classics departments, the Homeric template enriched with psychoanalytic meaning has prompted philologists to look anew at their historical texts.[13]

Such a pragmatic approach is also put forward by classicist Joel Christensen, who understands the stories that Odysseus tells to his benevolent hosts, the Phaeacians (the "Apologue," books IX–XII), as a "therapeutic narrative." Curiously enough, almost all of Odysseus's adventures at sea are told not by the epic narrator but in a long inset by the protagonist-as-eyewitness to his empathically listening hosts. This embedded narrative is a highly personal, and hence subjective, potentially unreliable, and indeed possibly therapeutic story of individual experience—the first one of such a considerable length known in the ancient literatures of Europe and the Near East. For Christensen (2018, 24), "Odysseus's therapeutic narrative illustrates the enduring and mutually beneficial power of epic and modern psychology to reinforce and elucidate one another. . . . Audiences leave these tales with the

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[13] See the deepened discussion in Meineck and Konstan (2014). Such double temporal moves are a key concern of the field of classical reception studies.

stories' models in their minds, and can use them to tell their own stories and explore their own worlds." (See also Christensen 2022.)

From this perspective, understanding trauma emerges as an ongoing, relational process within a transtemporal assemblage. Shay's approach to modern trauma using Odysseus thus need not be reduced to the problematic attempt to find sameness or analogies between psychic processes on different temporal and cultural levels. Instead, it can be seen as an active intervention in the circulation of story models, a work of translation, of interpreting and putting ancient narrative resources to new uses. This is not because the old is "just like" the new, but rather because the old can serve as a narrative model to frame the new. The *Odyssey* works here not as a mirror, but as a narrative tool—and a sense of its potential political agency within the actor-network is conveyed in the foreword to *Odysseus in America*, where U.S. Senators Max Cleland and John McCain (both Vietnam War veterans) confess to its "compelling insights into our own experience" (Shay 2002, XI).

But a narrative like the *Odyssey* does not just leap from out of nowhere into a present memory assemblage. The condition for this is a long process of cultural memory:[14] more than two and a half millennia of receptions, transcriptions, translations, and remediations, during which the epic emerged, shaped and altered by each new memory assemblage. Only therefore, and only in this way, are both of Homer's epics available today as narrative resources to address trauma. This is the deep historical dimension of the odyssey template as an "actor" in ecologies of cultural trauma.

13.5 Displacement as Cultural Trauma: Framing Diaspora with the *Odyssey*

Contrary to what modern travel and entertainment industries feature under names like "Odyssey cruises" may imply, Homer's Odysseus is not a man who travels for fun. His is a form of what today might be called "forced displacement." After his sack of Troy, with the famous ruse of the Trojan horse, Odysseus's fleet is tossed and torn across a mythical Mediterranean Sea for ten years. All the while, Odysseus longs for his home, kingdom, and wife. The reason for his involuntary exile is not connected to trade, labor,

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[14] I use the term "cultural memory" here in the specific sense of J. Assmann (2011 [1992]).

religious persecution, or genocide (some of the driving forces of modern diasporas). It is revenge: the wrath of the sea god Poseidon, whose one-eyed son, Polyphemus, Odysseus has blinded.

As my modernizing summary of Homer's *Odyssey* already indicates, the poem lends itself to a reading through the lens of modern knowledge about migration and diaspora. The reason for this is not only that it is a story about involuntary and unforeseeable travels and dangerous encounters, but that it also features hospitality as a key theme—that first question of all ancient and modern travelers: How will they be received by hosts and host societies?

The *Odyssey* is thus an almost three-millennia-old narrative template for the articulation of the trauma of forced displacement and the hope of return ("Ithaca"). But interestingly, for most of this time it was not used as such. Instead, the biblical narrative of Exodus proved much stronger. From the nineteenth century onward, "Exodus" was taken up by members of the African diaspora in the Americas to address their histories of forced displacement and slavery as cultural traumata. Exodus remains a powerful narrative template for African Americans to the present day, and it has informed, for example, many of President Obama's speeches (Hartnell 2011). Of course, one reason for this preference of Exodus over *Odyssey* is the sheer diffusion of biblical stories. But arguably, the greater traction of the story about the Israelites' exodus from Egypt (as told in the Five Books of Moses) is also due to the fact that it focuses on a clearly defined collectivity (the Israelites) and conveys a strong sense of shared cultural identity, whereas the *Odyssey* focuses on Odysseus as an individual and his cross-cultural encounters.

It is therefore not surprising that two of the best-known literary articulations of exile-as-trauma that draw on the *Odyssey* refer to individual experience. The Roman poet Ovid resorted increasingly to Homer's Ulysses (as Odysseus is called in the Latin tradition) when in his letters he lamented his banishment from Rome to Tomis on the Black Sea (today's Constanța in Romania). Du Bellay's famous sonnet "Heureux qui comme Ulysse, a fait un beau voyage" (*Les Regrets*, 1558) was written when the Renaissance poet was sent from his rural French home to the unloved metropolis of Rome to act as secretary to Cardinal du Bellay (Stanford 1963 [1954], 142, 176). These are literary articulations of painful but entirely individual displacements. The narrative schema is not (yet) used as a template for displacement as cultural trauma in the sense of Jeffrey Alexander—but it is clearly a cultural tool for the articulation of experiences with a traumatic quality.

It was only in the early twentieth century that Odysseus was turned into the forefather of modern exiles by such writers as James Joyce and Ezra Pound. Since the mid-twentieth century, members of the African diaspora in the Americas have increasingly reimagined themselves in Odyssean terms, and have successfully framed, and made legible for others, the trauma of transatlantic slavery and the continued experience of oppression. Of paramount importance in this respect are the writers and artists Ralph Ellison, Derek Walcott, Wilson Harris, and Romare Bearden. In his New World epic, *Omeros* (1990), Walcott gave shape to the cultural trauma of the diaspora in the Caribbean, using Homer's *Odyssey* as narrative template.[15] More than anything else, perhaps, Odysseus stands today for multiply displaced people, tossed across the Atlantic, faced with monstrous, Cylopean white colonizers, yet still nurturing the hope of eventually coming "home"—not so much to an ancestral Africa, but, following Walcott, in the Caribbean's rich creolized traditions.

In many ways, this "Caribbean odyssey" might seem an articulation of cultural trauma in the social constructivist sense. It exhibits some salient features of the literary field as one of cultural trauma's "institutional arenas" where "new master narratives of social suffering" (Alexander 2012, 19) are produced and disseminated. Walcott was awarded the Nobel Prize for *Omeros* in 1991, and his writings have become canonical literature, central items of university syllabi across the English-speaking world. The ascription of literary value, canonization, and the transnational spread of stories (also in translation) belong to the powerful "aesthetic" and "mass media" aspects of cultural trauma in the social constructivist sense (Alexander 2012, 20, 22).

But perhaps the writers of earlier centuries were quite right; if anything, then Odysseus's displacement constituted a personal trauma. Only by expanding the individual case to the collective dimension could Odysseus become the man who stands for a social group, turned into a modern creolized Caribbean Everyman. This upscaling, the broadening of the odyssey narrative from a story of individual to collective displacement, was effected—as it is so often in creative literature—by means of allegory.

Reading Homer allegorically has a long tradition that reaches back into antiquity, and was one of the methods of the Stoics and early Christian interpreters to endow the pagan epic with new meanings and thus keep it alive in

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[15] On the history and uses of Greek antiquity in the Caribbean, see Greenwood (2010).

the literary tradition—a key method in the cultural memory process. In the twentieth century, it is through allegory that Odysseus's individual trauma of displacement has come to express the traumata of African slaves in the Americas. The key is "national allegory," a literary form that Fredric Jameson has (controversially) identified as postcolonial literature's major strategy (for his new reflections on allegory, see Jameson 2019).

Walcott's *Omeros* is quite explicit about allegory. The narrator himself draws attention to the allegorical dimension of his New World epic, pointing to the "Homeric association" (Walcott 2008 [1990], 31) of his St. Lucia, a Caribbean island so much fought over by European colonial powers that it was once called "Helen of the West Indies." Fisherman Philoctete, who suffers from a wound in his leg, "believed that the wound came of the chained ankles of his ancestors" (Walcott 2008 [1990], 19). Here, the fictional character himself finds a metaphor for slavery's trauma (the physical wound created by slave shackles) and suggests an extension from individual pain (as physical trauma) to psychological, collective, and transgenerational trauma. While starting, as all national allegory does, from simple analogical thinking (the individual and his/her experience stand for the nation and its history), *Omeros* does not stay there. In the frameworks of its extended narrative allegory, the epic describes ongoing structural violence, the legacy of slavery, which renders Philoctete a poor man troubled by a sense of rootlessness and turns the tourists, who want to take a picturesque photo of the scarred black man, into wealthy Americans. The island's wholesale "touristification" (Carrigan 2012) reveals continuities of inequality across time, the stuff that "slow violence" (Nixon 2011) is made of.

In *Omeros*, cultural trauma therefore emerges not as simple correspondence between individual and collective experience, and also not as a phenomenon of "collective consciousness" (which does not get any more convincing by calling it *asabiyya*; see Jameson 2019, 196). Instead, in its extended narrative, the epic shows how its characters' personal and particular traumata emerge from political and sociocultural constellations of injustice, discrimination, and economic deprivation evolving across time. These dynamics were pointed out as early as the 1950s by Martinique-born psychoanalyist Frantz Fanon, for example in *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952), who, as Bond and Craps (2019, 109) maintain, "can be credited with recognizing the social nature of . . . traumas and the need for structural and material change in order for genuine healing to take place." While *Omeros* clearly suggests allegory as a reading mode, and has

contributed to the transnational communication of slavery and uprooting as "cultural trauma," a much more nuanced picture of the multiple actors constituting an ecology of trauma emerges from its narrative representation.

13.6 Transcultural Trauma: Trojan Women and Syrian Refugees

The most intriguing points about Homer's *Odyssey* and its relevance for an understanding of ecologies of trauma are its transcultural dimensions and uses. Two of these will be discussed in the following: first, the articulation of transcultural trauma in the *Odyssey* (Trojan women); and second, the uses of the poem in today's European discourses about the trials of refugees from Africa and the Middle East (Syrian refugees). After having examined ecologies of trauma with a view to jumps across time and across social scales, this last example considers jumps across identity categories.

There is one passage in the *Odyssey* that still today comes as a surprise. When Odysseus is at a banquet at the court of the Phaeacians and hears the blind bard Demodocus sing about his own feats in the Trojan War, he breaks down and cries. He is "melting into tears," sobbing uncontrollably. Astonishingly enough, the epic narrator describes Odysseus as weeping like a Trojan woman.

> Odysseus was melting into tears:
> His cheeks were wet with weeping, as a woman
> weeps, as she falls to wrap her arms around
> her husband, fallen from fighting for his home
> and children. She is watching as he gasps
> and dies. She shrieks, a clear high wail, collapsing
> upon his corpse. The men are right behind.
> They hit her shoulder with her spears and lead her
> to slavery, hard labor, and a life
> of pain. Her face is marked with her despair.
> In that same desperate way, Odysseus
> was crying.[16] (*Odyssey* 8.521–533)

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[16] I use Emily Wilson's (2017) vigorous translation of the *Odyssey*, a key actor in the reassembling of Homer for the present age (see also Erll 2024a).

This astounding passage has troubled interpreters for millennia. Classical philologist William H. Race (2014, 55) remarks that this passage is "a virtual lexicon of words for grief." The discursive representation of emotions—also across translations—remains a key to the mediation of trauma. But whose trauma is represented here? Odysseus's extreme grief is one thing, and he may indeed be overcome by what Race (2014, 56) identifies as "veterans' sudden rush of sorrow and grief at revisiting intense combat situations." Another thing is that this passage is rendered by the epic narrator in a curious literary form, what Margret Foley (1978) called a "reverse simile." In Homeric reverse similes, women are compared with men, humans are compared with animals. But this is the only simile in the epic, where the suffering of a Greek is compared with the suffering of Trojans. The heroic city-destroyer is compared with his hapless female victims. This suggests that after his ten-year odyssey, the king of Ithaca is now in a position similar to the Trojan women who lost everything (family, property, freedom) but their lives.

Given that throughout the *Odyssey* (contrary to what we find in the *Iliad*), the epic narrator focuses purely on the perspective of Odysseus and other Greeks, this is an amazing act of acknowledging other peoples' history (and ancient audiences understood the Trojan War as history), of empathy and imaginative investment that modern readers may not expect in an "archaic tale." It produces a version of "transcultural trauma" in the emphatic sense of acknowledging and empathizing with the suffering of others. Seen with Judith Butler, Homer provided his audiences with the "frames of war" that made Trojan lives "grievable."[17] It is true that in this simile, the traumatic experience of Trojan women is used to express the grief of Odysseus. But it seems inevitable that audiences also consider the simile the other way around and wonder about the Trojans and their trials. It also seems inevitable that they are reminded of the connection between Odysseus as perpetrator and the Trojan women as his victims. Different types of mnemonic relationality produce different types of trauma in this passage—including an excitingly early form of transcultural trauma.

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[17] Butler (2009, 1) criticizes the "selective and differential framing of violence . . . through which we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured (lose-able or injurable)." Her particular use of the framing-concept (which memory studies has inherited from Halbwachs) thus raises questions about transcultural trauma: our relation to the suffering of individuals seen as distant others and how their experiences can be rendered memorable, their traumata acknowledged.

These "tears of Trojan women" are a seed of the literary imagination that was richly developed later in Greek antiquity, when, under the impression of the Persian and Peloponnese wars, Sophocles and Euripides repeatedly imagined in their tragedies, with great empathy, what defeat in war meant for non-Greek peoples, centering their dramas around Persian and Trojan women. But when Homer's *Odyssey* entered Latin literature, writers like Virgil and Seneca took over the compassion for Trojan victims—but in a framework where Romans identified with the Trojans as their alleged ancestors. This actually meant *arresting* the Homeric potential of transcultural trauma; for what is lamented in Virgil's *Aeneid* (29–10 BCE) or in Seneca's *The Trojan Women* (ca. 54 CE) is an imagined "we," not a victimized "other." This brings what had originally been a remarkable feat of the transcultural imagination back to the more banal, antagonistic, and exclusionary logic of "cultural trauma" as described by Alexander and others.

What the travels of the "tears of Trojan women" through literary history hint at is the perennial question of who can and should remember whose traumata, and from what position: the various forms of mnemonic relationality, and the possibilities and limitations of jumps across identity categories of self and other. It also shows how traveling representations of cultural trauma can change quickly from empathetic investment to self-serving self-fashioning, to weapon and war cry.

But the potential of the *Odyssey* to frame transcultural trauma appears to have survived. It has emerged again during the so-called refugee crisis in Europe. The odyssey template increasingly pops up across a wide spectrum of mediations (news media, literature, art, performance, films, and such) to frame the traumatic experiences of today's refugees in the Mediterranean; from Patrick Kingsley's popular piece of new journalism, *The New Odyssey: The Story of Europe's Refugee Crisis* (2016), to Ai Wei Wei's artwork "Odyssey" (2018). But what does it mean to frame Syrian and African refugees with narrative patterns that possibly would not come to their own minds when articulating their traumata? (And this is not because Homer's epics were "Western tales" or "Western heritage," but because there is no strong tradition of remediations of the *Odyssey* in Arab literatures; it is a common heritage that so far has not been claimed; see Appiah 2018). It is a move that is clearly addressed to European audiences, using the Homeric template as a tool of familiarization, of communicating traumatic experiences that may not be easily intelligible to these audiences, and endowing them with the status of a foundational significance. It is an attempt at

constructing "transcultural trauma" much in the cultural trauma-logic of Jeffrey Alexander.

13.7 Coda: Against Collective Identity, for Relational Memory

Two things about framing ecologies of trauma with the *Odyssey* as narrative tool are striking. First, it is a traveling resource, from Greece to Rome to the Caribbean, and to Europe and the Middle East, and back again. The uses of a narrative template that has migrated through time and space point to the more general process of "traveling memory" (Erll 2011b). Cultural trauma, too, that seemingly fenced and group-specific form of memory, is more often than not a product of such traveling memory.

Second, the *Odyssey* as narrative template produces cultural trauma *without* a strong sense of collective identity. The poem itself does not feature strong "we-identities." After the fall of Troy, the Hellenic tribes separate in conflict with each other before they embark on their respective returns home (*nostoi*). Odysseus's crewmen appear anxious, self-serving, and critical of their leader, while the Ithacans at home are depicted as a divided, quarrelsome lot. And after having lost all his men, Odysseus in fact spends most of his ten-year errancy alone. Despite all the allegorization of Odysseus's individual experience into a cultural experience, what the odyssey narrative could never really do is frame a strongly bounded cultural, national, or nationalist trauma. It is just too volatile as a template, too focused on movement and encounter to serve as a schema expressing clear-cut and stable identities.[18]

Arguably, this is a good thing. The *Odyssey* enables a thinking of traumatic histories without the "lies that bind," as Anthony Kwame Appiah (2018) calls the diverse fictions of identity—whether they concern gender, class, religion, ethnicity, nation, or culture. Categorical constructions of pure collectivities and their eternal antagonism, or of blameless victims, are difficult to make with the *Odyssey*. Odysseus himself is as often perpetrator as he is victim (the Cyclops episode is the best-known in this regard; see Adorno and Horkheimer 2009 [1948]). When seen through the trauma lens, the *Odyssey*

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[18] Jan Assmann's (2011 [1992]) discussion of the Homeric epics as foundational and identity-building texts in ancient Greece refers in the case of the *Odyssey* more to the epic as a canonized medium of memory than to the contents of its story.

displays multiple traumatizations of various "implicated subjects" (Rothberg 2019). In this it seems closer to the truth of most histories at the basis of cultural trauma, complex and messy as they are. As Walcott's Caribbean example shows, this insight need not lead to a depoliticization of cultural trauma narratives, but to greater nuance, and thus the sustainability of their claims.

All this does not really facilitate a vision of the odyssey template in strictly binary terms, with ingroup bias and outgroup exclusion, clear-cut definitions of self and otherness. Homer's epics are less concerned with "collective identity" (Greek, European, Western) than commentators from 1800 onward would have us believe—possibly because they lived in an age of national identity formation, and this was therefore their lens for perceiving Homer (just as my lens may be the relational and the transcultural).

In other words, at the beginning of cultural narrations of (memories of) war, travel, displacement, and encounter lie two epics that offer the possibility of conceptualizing identity not—or at least not strongly and exclusively—as binary, antagonistic, and heterological, but as *relational*. And as the "tears of Trojan" women show, the *Odyssey* also enables an understanding of trauma as relational. Craps and Bond (2019, 110) alert us to the fact that Cathy Caruth had already pointed to the "inherent relationality of trauma." In *Unclaimed Experience* she states that "history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (Caruth 1996, 24). Though history is of course also how we are implicated in each other's joy, growth, or well-being, it is clear that there is no simplistic concept of collective identity at the beginning of trauma theory in the 1990s.

This emphasis on relationality is an extremely important point for the field of memory studies at large, where it seems that no definition of "collective memory" can do without "collective identity" as its companion term, a field that seems to rely on the idea that collective memory *must* be intimately connected with, stabilize, or affirm collective identity—all the way from social psychology to sociology and to cultural history. Transcultural approaches to the study of memory have already worked against the idea of memory staying put within bounded, naturalized collectives and has emphasized solidarity across national, ethnic, or religious groups (Rothberg 2009; Erll 2011b; Craps 2013).

But there is reason to question even more fundamentally the collective memory–collective identity bind. Of course, there is a memory-identity

nexus in discussions of individual memory, from Locke onward. But just as no one would want to associate all forms of individual memory with identity (it seems to be a product of autobiographical memory and not, say, of priming), there may be modes of collective memory that do not bear on collective identity at all. Mathematical formulas mediated in society and transmitted across time are a case of collective memory without collective identity. Of course, knowledge and habits acquired in a certain sociocultural context shape people. But calling such sociocultural shaping "collective identity" means widening out the term to such an extent that its meaning becomes diluted. Jan Assmann (2011 [1992], 114) usefully distinguishes between collective identity as a "basic structure" and as a "form of enhancement" through reflection. As a *basic structure*, "culture and society convey or generate an identity that is always personal though not necessarily collective. The individual's self-awareness is influenced by them, but this does not mean that (s)he will automatically have a sense of belonging to a particular society and its culture." *Enhancement* only takes place with the emergence of a "we-consciousness," that is, a sense of belonging and solidarity with a collectivity.

Identity itself is a rather recent concept, and "collective identity" even more so (Niethammer 2000). Could it be that the very idea of collective identity is yet another one of the "lies that bind?" But even Appiah, who masterly and sweepingly deconstructs categories of gender, religion, ethnicity, nation, class, and culture, does not touch the underlying concept of collective identity. It seems difficult to question these days. Appiah can't help stating that, however fictitious particular collective identities may turn out to be, there is the basic phenomenon of "clannishness," and that "the assertion of identity always proceeds through contrast or opposition" (Appiah 2018, 202).

But while "opposition" in the structuralist sense is a truism (we always discriminate—we make differences—in order to be able to grasp the shape of a concept, and of ourselves), this basic meaning of the term tends to slide away in today's discourse about memory and identity toward "opposition" in the social or political sense. This bears the danger of naturalizing certain habits of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe, where the strongest affirmations of national identity went hand in hand with the strongest denigration of other nations. But should a practice of 200 years ago (and yes, re-emerging in our current age of populism) really inform the academic concepts we create to address the challenges of the twenty-first century? Doesn't the construction of self-images equally "always proceed"

through a recognition of similarities with others, indebtedness, interaction, and cooperation? And have not these relational operations often enough shown their power to transversally cut through seemingly different constituencies, and been the very condition for the emergence of the new?

What does all this mean for the study of cultural trauma? There are potentially traumatizing events (such as floods, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, and other natural catastrophes) that are not primarily perceived and represented according to an identity/alterity binary, along antagonistic lines, or in an accusatory logic. Understanding the expression of and coping with such traumata will point researchers in the directions of cooperation, sharing, and resilience (Lindsey et al. 2016). Research in narrative psychology on emotional memories has shown that one can better cope with difficult experience as more perspectives are integrated into one's narrative about the past (Habermas 2019). Accentuating such multiperspectival memory implies turning away from the logic of exclusionary collective identities and toward the logic of relationality.

This is also a question of what anthropologists would describe as emic and etic perspectives. While historical actors such as populist politicians will insist on strong collective identities (emic perspective), a researcher-observer may quickly identify cracks in the identificatory armor (etic perspective). The question is whether academia wants to submit its research to what Amartya Sen (2006) has called "civilizational incarceration." We may be incarcerated, day after day, by politicians, activists, and marketing experts (with both laudable and not so laudable intentions). But scholars should be able to demonstrate how to break out of the cage of collective identity.

Don't get me wrong. Now more than ever, it remains of paramount importance to critically study constructions of memory that go hand in hand with strong, bounded, and antagonistic collective identities, and that use cultural trauma as political weapons. These practices are currently (re-)emerging across the globe. But as general academic concepts, memory and trauma should remain open—returning to the vocabulary of ANT—to other possibilities of conceiving associations between social actors.

This is also a question of mental models. Conceiving of memories as assemblages within a flat ontology, with dynamically changing associations, helps us leave behind models that turn memories into monad-like entities (some "individual," others "collective") and put them into hierarchically stacked containers with identity labels. Memory—also traumatic

memory—in fact is Odyssean, replete with unforeseeable travels, strange encounters, and new connections in unknown lands.

Across time, the Homeric *Odyssey* as narrative template has shown its agency in assemblages of traumatic memory, but it has tended to resist association with strong concepts of collective identity. It has played an important role in the articulation of individual traumatic experience and its communalization (from Odysseus at the Phaeacians to Ovid, Du Bellay, and Shay's Vietnam veterans). But it has never worked particularly well for antagonistic narrations of "cultural trauma" in the sense of Alexander et al. (2012)

It seems that the trauma of displacement and the hope of return—that core Odyssean story—just cannot be narrated with Homer's poem, whenever clear-cut collective identities need to be foregrounded. This task is fulfilled much more effectively by the Exodus narrative, with its slots for two antagonistic groups (Israelites versus Egyptians), its unbridgeable ethnic and religious boundaries, its "linear and uncomplicated movement from bondage to freedom, from Egypt to the promised land" and its seductive "suggestion of the conjunction of innocence and power" (Hartnell 2011, 4–5). Exodus has lent itself particularly well to articulations of collective identities based on traumatic histories, by very different groups with very different political agendas, and it has seen the most intriguing narrative inversions—all the way from Puritan settlers' stories of American exceptionalism to the Back-to-Africa movement and Afrocentrist claims to an Egyptian heritage. Transculturalizing the antagonistic story of Exodus, on the other hand, has been the agenda of a debate across time that was reconstructed by Jan Assmann in *Moses the Egyptian* (1997). In retelling the story of Moses as that of a man deeply influenced by Egyptian society and religion—that biblical "Other"—thinkers from Maimonides to Schiller to Freud dreamed the dream of revoking the Mosaic distinction (Assmann 1997, 166), the distinction between truth and untruth, and between the associated collectivities.

The Homeric *Odyssey* engenders exactly such narrative possibility to produce stories of relationality. Odysseus's versatile character, multidirectional movements, and cross-cultural encounters lend themselves to framing entangled histories and transcultural memories. A sense of transcultural trauma—acknowledging both the pain of others and the fundamental relationality of one's own painful history with that of perceived others—is a precious legacy of Homer's *Odyssey* (most powerfully expressed in the "tears of Trojan women"), which was richly taken up in different ecologies of memory across time and is just now re-emerging in the European refugee crisis.