



Memory and Trauma in Art and Literature: Exploring Representations of Historical Trauma

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Article information

Received: 18th July 2025

Received in revised form: 13th August 2025

Accepted: 11th September 2025

Available online: 23rd October 2025

Volume: 1

Issue: 1

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17421838>

Abstract

This article examines the complex relationship between memory, trauma, and artistic representation in visual art and literature. Through an interdisciplinary lens, it explores how artists and writers have developed aesthetic strategies to engage with collective historical traumas such as war, genocide, and displacement. The research analyzes key works from the post-Holocaust era, the aftermath of colonial violence, contemporary war narratives, and responses to forced migration, demonstrating how these artistic expressions function as both testimonial artifacts and sites of cultural memory. Drawing on trauma theory, memory studies, and aesthetic philosophy, this article argues that art and literature serve not merely as representations of traumatic events but as active interventions that can reshape cultural memory, foster empathetic engagement, and contribute to processes of individual and collective healing. Furthermore, it examines the ethical complexities and limitations inherent in artistic representations of trauma, proposing that the most effective works acknowledge the tension between the imperative to witness and the fundamental inadequacy of representation. This research contributes to our understanding of how creative practices participate in the crucial work of bearing witness to historical trauma while creating spaces for reflection, reconciliation, and resistance.

Keywords:- Trauma Studies, Collective Memory, Holocaust Representation, Postcolonial Art, Testimony, Witness Literature, Aesthetic Theory, Displacement Narratives.

Introduction: The Intersection of Trauma, Memory, and Artistic Expression

Historical traumas, genocides, wars, colonial violence, forced displacements leave profound marks not only on those who directly experience them but on cultural memory and identity. While traditional historical documentation provides essential factual records of these events, art and literature offer unique capacities to engage with the subjective, emotional, and often unspeakable dimensions of traumatic experience. This research examines how creative works function as vehicles for the expression, transmission, and transformation of traumatic memory, serving both as testimonial artifacts and as interventions in collective memory formation.

The relationship between trauma and representation presents inherent paradoxes. As scholars like Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra have observed, trauma is characterized precisely by its resistance to full comprehension and integration into narrative memory. The traumatic event exceeds the mind's capacity to process it, manifesting instead through intrusive symptoms, gaps, silences, and repetitions. How, then, can art and literature represent what fundamentally eludes representation? What aesthetic strategies do artists and writers

employ to engage with historical catastrophes? What ethical responsibilities and limitations accompany such artistic endeavors?

This article explores these questions through analysis of works spanning different historical traumas and cultural contexts, examining how creative practices both reflect and shape our understanding of traumatic history. It considers how various aesthetic forms from narrative fragmentation to visual symbolism, from documentary approaches to metaphorical abstraction serve to communicate traumatic experience while acknowledging its fundamental unrepresentability.

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond academic interest. In an era marked by increasing political polarization, historical revisionism, and the fading of living memory for key historical traumas like the Holocaust, artistic representations play a crucial role in preserving and transmitting historical awareness. Moreover, as contemporary crises continue to generate new collective traumas from ongoing armed conflicts to mass displacement understanding the relationship between creative expression and traumatic memory becomes increasingly urgent.

Theoretical Framework: Trauma, Memory, And Representation

Trauma Theory and Its Evolution

The conceptualization of trauma has evolved significantly over the past century. From Freud's early work on "traumatic neurosis" to contemporary neuroscientific understandings, trauma has been characterized as an overwhelming experience that disrupts normal cognitive processing, resulting in a temporal dissociation where the past intrudes persistently into the present. Cathy Caruth's influential work defines trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena."

The field of trauma studies emerged prominently in the 1990s, drawing on psychoanalytic theory, literary criticism, and Holocaust studies. Scholars such as Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, and Marianne Hirsch expanded understanding beyond individual psychology to examine how trauma operates at collective and intergenerational levels. Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" has been particularly valuable in explaining how traumatic histories are transmitted to subsequent generations who did not directly experience the events but nonetheless inherit their psychological and cultural effects.

More recent developments in trauma theory have included challenges to Eurocentric models. Scholars like Stef Craps and Michael Rothberg have called for greater attention to non-Western experiences and expressions of trauma, pointing out that dominant trauma paradigms often inadequately address colonial violence, ongoing structural oppression, and non-Western cultural responses to catastrophe.

Memory Studies and Cultural Memory

Memory studies, an interdisciplinary field that examines how societies remember and forget, provides essential frameworks for understanding how traumatic events enter cultural consciousness. Jan Assmann distinguishes between "communicative memory" (everyday, informal memory transmitted through direct communication) and "cultural memory" (institutionalized, formalized memory preserved through cultural formations like texts, monuments, and rituals). Artistic representations of trauma contribute significantly to cultural memory, transforming individual experiences into collective narratives that shape group identity.

Aleida Assmann's concept of "canon and archive" further illuminates how some memories become actively circulated while others remain latent but preserved. Art and literature can function to either reinforce canonical memories or recover archived ones, challenging dominant historical narratives and bringing marginalized experiences into public consciousness.

Pierre Nora's influential concept of "lieux de mémoire" (sites of memory) describes how physical locations, objects, and cultural artifacts become repositories of collective memory when living, organic memory fades. Artistic works often function as such sites, crystallizing and preserving memory beyond the lifespan of direct witnesses.

Aesthetic Theory and Ethical Considerations

The representation of trauma raises profound ethical questions that have been addressed by thinkers from Theodor Adorno to Jacques Rancière. Adorno's famous declaration that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" has been widely interpreted not as a prohibition but as a recognition of the profound challenge trauma poses to aesthetic representation. The danger of aestheticizing suffering rendering it beautiful or pleasurable raises concerns about exploiting victims' experiences or normalizing violence.

Simultaneously, there exists what James E. Young calls "the imperative to tell" the ethical obligation to bear witness to historical atrocities. This tension between the inadequacy of representation and the necessity of testimony characterizes much trauma-related art and literature.

Contemporary aesthetic theory has increasingly emphasized the political dimensions of trauma representation. Judith Butler's work on "frames of recognition" examines how aesthetic forms determine whose suffering is recognized as grievable. Similarly, Rancière's concept of the "distribution of the sensible" highlights how art can reconfigure what is visible and sayable within public discourse, potentially bringing previously unacknowledged suffering into view.

Holocaust Representation: The Limits and Necessities of Aesthetic Response

Literary Negotiations with the Unspeakable

The Holocaust presented unprecedented challenges to representation, with many survivors and critics questioning whether conventional narrative forms could adequately convey its horror without domesticating or trivializing it. Survivor testimonies like Elie Wiesel's *Night* (Wiesel 1956) and Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man* (Levi 1947) developed distinctive literary strategies to communicate their experiences while acknowledging language's insufficiency. Levi's precise, almost scientific prose deliberately avoids emotional language, reflecting his commitment to bearing clear witness while recognizing the impossibility of conveying the full reality of Auschwitz.

The problem of representation becomes even more complex in fiction about the Holocaust. Imre Kertész's semi-autobiographical novel *Fatelessness* (Imre 1975) employs the perspective of a naïve teenage narrator whose limited understanding creates a devastating ironic distance. This technique avoids both sentimentality and the presumption of comprehensive understanding. Jorge Semprún's *Literature or Life* (Semprún 1994) explicitly thematizes the conflict between literary aesthetics and traumatic truth, exploring how narrative structure inevitably transforms chaotic traumatic experience into something ordered and potentially falsifying.

Second-generation Holocaust literature demonstrates how trauma reverberates intergenerationally. Art Spiegelman's graphic narrative *Maus* (Spiegelman 1980-1991) innovatively employs the comic form to depict not only his father's Holocaust experiences but also the difficult process of receiving and representing that testimony. Through its self-reflexive approach and animal metaphor (depicting Jews as mice and Nazis as cats), *Maus* acknowledges the mediated nature of Holocaust memory while still honoring the imperative to transmit it.

W.G. Sebald's novels, particularly *Austerlitz* (Sebald 2001), represent a later approach to Holocaust representation that emphasizes absence, fragmentation, and the belated recognition of trauma. Sebald's incorporation of uncaptioned photographs creates an ambiguous documentary effect that mirrors the uncertain, fragmentary nature of traumatic memory.

Visual Art and the Holocaust

Visual artists confronting the Holocaust have grappled with similar questions about appropriate representation. Some, like Holocaust survivor David Olère, created direct testimonial art depicting scenes witnessed in the concentration camps. Olère's drawings provide unique visual testimony to the operations of the crematorium at Auschwitz where he was forced to work, yet they also reveal how even direct witnessing involves subjective interpretation and selection.

Other artists have approached the Holocaust more obliquely. Anselm Kiefer's monumental paintings engage with Germany's Nazi past through abstract, symbolic landscapes laden with ash, lead, and straw materials that evoke destruction and desolation without directly depicting atrocity. His work *Margarethe* (Kiefer 1981), inspired by Paul Celan's poem "Death Fugue," incorporates straw to represent the "golden hair of Margarethe" (representing Aryan Germany) mentioned in the poem, creating a material connection to memory while avoiding literal representation.

Christian Boltanski's installations work with the artifacts and archival traces of lives lost. His work *Reserve* (Boltanski 1989) features photographs of anonymous Jewish schoolchildren from pre-Holocaust Europe, illuminated by small lamps. The installation evokes both memorial and interrogation, highlighting both presence and absence, remembrance and loss. By using found photographs rather than created images, Boltanski raises questions about appropriation, anonymity, and the ethics of representation.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum exemplifies institutional approaches to visual representation of trauma, carefully balancing documentary evidence with respect for victims. The museum's careful curation of photographs, for instance, avoids displaying the most graphic images of atrocity at full size or eye level, acknowledging both the necessity of witnessing and the potential for voyeurism or desensitization.

Colonial Trauma and Postcolonial Art

Literary Responses to Colonial Violence

Postcolonial literature has been instrumental in articulating the traumatic legacies of colonialism, challenging Eurocentric historical narratives and giving voice to experiences long marginalized. Chinua Achebe's groundbreaking novel *Things Fall Apart* (Achebe 1958) depicts the cultural trauma inflicted by British colonization in Nigeria, demonstrating how colonial encounter destroyed not only lives but entire social structures and systems of meaning. By centering indigenous perspectives and showcasing the complexity of pre-colonial society, Achebe's work performs a reparative function, recovering cultural memory that colonial narratives had suppressed.

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (Rhys 1966) revisits Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* from the perspective of the "madwoman in the attic," revealing how canonical British literature normalized colonial exploitation. By illuminating the violence that underpins the original narrative, Rhys's novel demonstrates literature's capacity to recover suppressed traumatic histories.

Contemporary authors continue to explore colonial trauma through innovative literary approaches. Edwidge Danticat's works examine the intergenerational transmission of trauma in Haiti, a nation shaped by both colonial violence and subsequent political repression. Her novel *The Farming of Bones* (Danticat 1998) depicts the 1937 massacre of Haitians by the Dominican Republic, demonstrating how historical trauma continues to shape national identity and cross-border relations. Through fragmented narrative and poetic language, Danticat conveys both the horror of events and the difficulty of articulating traumatic experience.

Visual Art and Postcolonial Memory

Visual artists have similarly engaged with the traumatic legacies of colonialism, often employing strategies that both document historical violence and imagine decolonial futures. South African artist William Kentridge's animated charcoal drawings address apartheid's violence while refusing fixed, monumental representations. His technique of continually erasing and redrawing images creates palimpsests that visually embody the unstable, contested nature of traumatic memory. Works like his *History of the Main Complaint* (Kentridge 1996) use surreal medical imagery to explore the relationship between individual and collective bodies, suggesting how national trauma manifests in personal experience.

Indigenous Australian art has powerfully addressed the trauma of colonization and forced displacement from ancestral lands. Emily Kame Kngwarreye's abstract paintings, while not explicitly narrative, encode cultural knowledge and connection to country that colonial policies attempted to eradicate. Her work demonstrates how art can preserve cultural memory in forms that resist colonial legibility while affirming indigenous continuity and resilience.

Kara Walker's silhouette installations directly confront the traumatic history of American slavery through a form traditionally associated with genteel portraiture. Works like *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby* (Walker 2014), a massive sugar-coated sculpture installed in a former sugar refinery, force confrontation with the economic foundations of racial exploitation while referencing how Black bodies, particularly female bodies, were both consumed and erased in American history. Walker's work demonstrates art's capacity to make historical trauma viscerally present in ways that statistical or purely factual accounts cannot achieve.

War Narratives: Between Documentation and Artistic Transformation

Literary Representations of War Trauma

War literature spans a spectrum from documentary testimony to highly aestheticized representation, with different approaches offering distinct insights into traumatic experience. World War I generated a body of literature that established many conventions of war writing. Wilfred Owen's poetry, with its combination of realistic detail and formal craft, demonstrates how aesthetic form can intensify rather than diminish traumatic impact. His famous use of half-rhyme creates an unsettling quality that mirrors the psychological disruption of combat trauma.

Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (O'Brien 1990) exemplifies postmodern approaches to war narrative through its explicit meditation on the relationship between truth, memory, and storytelling. The book's fragmented structure and metafictional elements reflect both the disorienting nature of the Vietnam War and the difficulty of accurately conveying traumatic experience. O'Brien's assertion that "story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth" suggests how literary representation might paradoxically access emotional realities that factual accounts miss.

More recent war literature has expanded beyond combat experience to address civilian trauma. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (Adichie 2006) depicts the Nigerian Civil War through multiple perspectives, including those of women and children. This polyvocal approach challenges the typical masculinist focus of war narratives while demonstrating how conflict disrupts entire social fabrics, not just individual psyches.

War Photography and Visual Art

War photography occupies an ambiguous position between documentation and art, raising distinctive ethical questions about representation. Susan Sontag's essential critiques questioned whether photographs of suffering actually diminish compassion through overexposure. Nonetheless, certain images have proven instrumental in shaping public memory and political response, from Nick Ut's photograph of Kim Phuc fleeing a napalm attack in Vietnam to more recent images of Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi.

Contemporary photojournalists like James Nachtwey have developed approaches that balance documentary purpose with aesthetic consideration, using formal techniques to draw viewers into ethical relationship with subjects rather than objectifying them. Recent technological developments pose new challenges, as the proliferation of digital images from conflict zones creates both unprecedented access and questions about authenticity and context.

Beyond photojournalism, artists have employed various strategies to represent war trauma. Iraqi artist Wafaa Bilal's performance piece *Domestic Tension* (2007) placed him in a gallery for a month where internet users could remotely fire a paintball gun at him, creating an experience that commented on the technological mediation of violence while physically manifesting the vulnerability of civilian bodies in conflict zones. Such work demonstrates how art can move beyond representation to create embodied experiences that foster empathetic engagement with traumatic realities.

Displacement Narratives: Art and Literature of Exile and Migration

Literary Expressions of Displacement

Forced migration whether through refugee crises, political exile, or economic necessity constitutes a distinct form of collective trauma that has generated significant literary response. Edward Said's concept of "exile consciousness" identifies the unique perspective of the displaced person, characterized by plural awareness, perpetual liminality, and complex relationship to both homeland and host country.

V.S. Naipaul's novels explore this condition through characters who experience profound dislocation and identity crisis following migration from the Caribbean to England. Works like *A House for Mr. Biswas* (Naipaul 1961) and *The Enigma of Arrival* (Naipaul 1987) depict the psychological impacts of displacement while examining how colonial histories create the conditions for migration itself, connecting personal trauma to larger historical forces.

Contemporary refugee narratives have emerged as a significant literary development, with works like Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (Hamid 2017) employing magical realism to represent the disorienting experience of forced migration. By using magical "doors" that transport characters instantly across borders, Hamid captures the psychological rupture of displacement while avoiding voyeuristic depiction of physical suffering. Viet Thanh Nguyen's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Sympathizer* (Nguyen 2015) similarly employs innovative narrative strategies to represent refugee experience, using a confessional format and duplicitous narrator to explore the divided consciousness produced by displacement.

Memoir has proven particularly significant in refugee literature, with works like Kao Kalia Yang's *The Latecomer* (Yang 2008) documenting Hmong displacement following the Vietnam War. Such testimonial writing serves both personal and collective purposes, preserving cultural memory while asserting the humanity of people often reduced to statistics in political discourse.

Visual Representations of Displacement

Visual art addressing displacement ranges from documentary approaches to metaphorical exploration. Photographer Sebastião Salgado's long-term project *Migrations* documented population movements across forty countries, creating a comprehensive visual archive of one of the defining phenomena of the late twentieth century. Though criticized by some for aestheticizing suffering, Salgado's work demonstrates photography's capacity to bear witness to global patterns of displacement that exceed individual testimony.

Installation art has proven particularly effective in conveying the material and psychological dimensions of displacement. Doris Salcedo's sculptures transform everyday domestic objects like furniture into unsettling forms that evoke absence and loss. Her installation *Atrabiliarios* (Salcedo 1994), featuring shoes belonging to

disappeared Colombian women embedded in niches in the gallery wall and covered with translucent animal skin, powerfully materializes the simultaneous presence and absence characteristic of traumatic loss.

Ai Weiwei's recent works addressing the refugee crisis exemplify art's capacity for both documentary and symbolic engagement with displacement. His installation at the 2016 Berlin Konzerthaus, featuring 14,000 life jackets collected from refugees arriving on Lesbos, transformed statistical knowledge into visceral understanding through material presence. Such work demonstrates art's unique ability to make abstract humanitarian crises tangibly present to viewers, potentially fostering empathetic response where news reports might fail.

Contemporary Innovations: Digital Media and New Forms of Trauma Representation

Digital Literature and Interactive Narratives

Digital technologies have enabled new approaches to representing trauma that emphasize interactivity, non-linearity, and multimedia integration. These qualities align with trauma's characteristic disruption of linear temporality and integration of sensory experience. Works like Shelley Jackson's hypertext novel *Patchwork Girl* (Jackson 1995) employ fragmented narrative structures that readers must actively navigate, creating an experience that mirrors the disjointed quality of traumatic memory.

More recent digital narratives have addressed specific historical traumas through interactive formats. USC Shoah Foundation's "New Dimensions in Testimony" project uses artificial intelligence to create interactive testimonies of Holocaust survivors, allowing users to ask questions and receive responses drawn from extensive recorded interviews. This technology addresses the impending loss of direct survivor testimony, creating new possibilities for intergenerational transmission of traumatic memory.

New Media Art and Immersive Technologies

Virtual and augmented reality technologies offer unprecedented possibilities for immersive engagement with traumatic history. Projects like "Witness: Auschwitz" use VR to place users within historically accurate reconstructions of concentration camps, raising both new possibilities for empathetic understanding and ethical concerns about voyeurism and trivialization.

Artists have engaged critically with these technologies' potential and limitations. Nonny de la Peña's "immersive journalism" projects use VR to recreate scenes based on testimonial accounts from conflict zones, positioning users as witnesses rather than participants. Works like her "Project Syria" (de la Peña 2014) demonstrate how new technologies might extend documentary traditions while raising important questions about simulation, authenticity, and the ethics of immersion in others' trauma.

Conclusion: The Future of Trauma Representation

This research has examined diverse approaches to representing historical trauma across media, historical contexts, and cultural traditions. Several key insights emerge from this analysis:

First, effective artistic engagements with trauma typically acknowledge representation's inherent limitations while still honoring the ethical imperative to witness. The most compelling works operate in this productive tension, developing formal innovations that reflect trauma's resistance to conventional narrative or visual representation while still communicating its reality and significance.

Second, cultural context fundamentally shapes both the experience and representation of trauma. Western trauma theory's emphasis on event-based trauma and narrative disruption may inadequately address colonial and postcolonial contexts where trauma operates through ongoing structural violence and cultural erasure. Artistic responses have been essential in developing more culturally specific frameworks for understanding and addressing diverse traumatic experiences.

Third, trauma representation's functions extend beyond documentation to include commemoration, healing, prevention, and resistance. Art and literature create spaces for mourning losses and recognizing suffering that official histories might minimize or erase. They can foster empathetic connection across cultural and historical boundaries, potentially contributing to prevention of future violence. And they can articulate resistance to narratives that normalize or justify historical trauma.

As living memory of key historical traumas fades, artistic representation becomes increasingly crucial for intergenerational transmission. Simultaneously, ongoing conflicts and displacements create new collective traumas that demand artistic response. Future research might productively explore how emerging technologies

offer new possibilities for representing trauma while raising new ethical questions about simulation, appropriation, and commodification of suffering.

The relationship between trauma, memory, and artistic representation remains complex and evolving. By examining how creative works engage with historical catastrophe, we gain deeper understanding not only of trauma's impacts but also of art's capacity to bear witness, preserve memory, and imagine more just futures in the aftermath of historical violence.

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