

Article

Parallel Narratives: Trauma, Relationality, and Dissociation in Psychoanalysis and Realist Fiction

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Abstract: The reciprocal relationship between cultural trauma studies and psychoanalytic discourse on the one hand, and trauma studies and fictional representations of trauma on the other, has been commented on by scholars within the field of literary studies. What connects the representation of trauma in cultural trauma theory, trauma fiction, and psychoanalysis is that it is regarded as something that overwhelms an individual's capacities for processing and functioning. However, while cultural trauma theory has come under scrutiny for prioritizing too narrow a view of trauma and its representations, the considerable critiques of and revisions to Freud's theories, developed in the 1980/90s, have been mostly ignored by cultural trauma theorists. In this interdisciplinary article, we draw on relational psychoanalytic perspectives to demonstrate how relational revisions to psychoanalytic theory and techniques, as well as views on dissociation, can offer new perspectives for approaching literary works of fiction, such as the realist novel, which engage with the subject of trauma outside of established trauma conventions. We demonstrate that trauma novels by Lisa Appignanesi and Aminatta Forna parallel these revisions to psychoanalytic theory and techniques, allowing for a more pluralistic and nuanced representation of responses to trauma and suffering.

Keywords: relational psychoanalysis; trauma theory; trauma literature; Holocaust; postcolonial literature



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1. Introduction

Early cultural trauma theorists, such as Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman, were strongly inspired by Sigmund Freud, especially his later views on trauma, appearing in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud [1920] 1961) and *Moses and Monotheism* (Freud 1939). Freud made repeated attempts to understand trauma which, while not fully internally consistent, share an emphasis in terms of endowing trauma with a quality of belatedness, *Nachträglichkeit*, meaning that the traumatic effect of an event is revealed only when it resurfaces in memory (Fletcher 2013, pp. 57–87). Freud's early writings were influenced by Pierre Janet, whose theory of dissociation has been woven into contemporary theories of trauma (Moskowitz and van der Hart 2020), including Caruth's (1995). Janet has been credited as the first theorist to acknowledge the place of dissociation in trauma-induced pathologies (Putnam 1989).

Reflecting Janet's understanding of trauma as dissociation of the personality, and Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*, early cultural trauma theorists championed a modernist and fragmented aesthetic, representing trauma as haunting and unspeakable (Bond and Craps 2020, p. 112). This approach to cultural representations of trauma has now become criticized for being too narrow and universalizing (Gibbs 2014, p. 26). Critics including Roger Luckhurst and Alan Gibbs have looked beyond the established canon of trauma fiction to examine the potential of popular, realist, or postcolonial fiction for expressing a plurality of traumatic experiences.

Further, as noted by Luckhurst (2008), Caruth, Felman, and others engaged only marginally with the considerable revisions to and critiques of Freud's theories occurring in

the 1980s and 1990s (p. 10). One strongly developing perspective at that time was relational psychoanalysis which, as a pluralistic project, brings together many strands and schools of psychoanalytic thought. This has seen relational thinkers criticize classical psychoanalytic perspectives for universalizing theory and technique and failing to acknowledge the impact of socio-cultural factors in suffering and trauma (Altman 2004, 2009; Cushman 1990, 1996). Relational perspectives explicitly attempt to improve the cultural awareness and applicability of psychoanalytic theory and technique. They place ontological primacy on the social environment, viewing identity as naturally multifaceted and fluid. This revision has extended to thinking on dissociation, which has been brought into the realm of natural psychological functioning.

These shifting views of trauma—based on questioning the fragmented aesthetics, the unspeakability paradigm, power relations in psychoanalysis, the cultural embeddedness of psychoanalysis, and the pathology of dissociation—are mirrored in the literary fiction of Lisa Appignanesi and Aminatta Forna, which will be discussed in this article. Our approach to their contemporary trauma novels builds on previous scholarship in creating a dialogue between psychoanalytic thinking and trauma theory in literary fiction, while also directing the focus of research away from the canon of traditional trauma texts. The realist novel, previously shunned as incapable of appropriately expressing trauma (Bond and Craps 2020, p. 113), can be uniquely suited to representing both trauma and dissociation, depicting it as something that the individual can gain the capacity to process, narrativize, and communicate. The selection of texts mirrors the interdisciplinary approach of this paper as we have selected texts that engage with the aftermath of the Shoah and postcolonial suffering. This selection does not suggest a comparison of the historical events and contexts, but allows for the examination of literary and cultural representations of trauma, including an analysis of the similarities and differences in those responses.

In the following, we will outline the theoretical perspectives of trauma theory and relational psychoanalysis which inform our approach. We then discuss Appignanesi's and Forna's novels by drawing on the illustrated frameworks, focusing on questions of perspective and creative healing through the sharing of traumatic memories in *The Memory Man* (Appignanesi [2004] 2008), and the significance of context and relational connection in *The Memory of Love* (Forna [2010] 2011). In our conclusion, we evaluate the potential of using our approach in the efforts to (re)assess the realist form as a way of conveying and portraying trauma in literature.

2. Theoretical Perspectives: Trauma Theory, Relational Psychoanalysis, and Dissociation

2.1. Trauma Theory and Trauma Fiction: Brief Overview

While trauma became a point of interest for psychoanalytic thinkers from the late nineteenth century onwards, and gathered increased attention from clinical and psychological studies in the aftermath of the two world wars, the Shoah, and the Vietnam War, literary or cultural trauma theory is a phenomenon of the 1990s. Literary critics such as Caruth began to develop an interest in literary representations of trauma, partially as a reaction against a perceived depoliticization of literary studies (Buelens et al. 2014, p. 3). The temporal distance and differing foci notwithstanding, literary or cultural trauma theory has been strongly influenced by the psychodynamic perspectives of Freud and Janet. Luckhurst (2008) notes this when he points out that “the dominant model for cultural trauma [...] derives from a relatively narrow segment of this complex, multidisciplinary history” (p. 4). Luckhurst continues by arguing that Freud's work, especially his later writings, has been deeply influential, constituting “the unavoidable foundation for theories of trauma” (p. 8), and points out that Caruth draws heavily on Freud's concept *Nachträglichkeit* or deferred action of trauma, which can only be understood “after the fact, through the symptoms and flashbacks and the delayed attempts at understanding” (p. 5). *Nachträglichkeit* makes trauma an interesting and challenging subject for literature—as the titles of the novels chosen for discussion here indicate. As Luckhurst (2008) elaborates:

For Caruth, trauma is therefore a crisis of representation, of history and truth, and of narrative time. Repeatedly, there is the claim that psychoanalysis and literature are particularly privileged forms of writing that can attend to these perplexing paradoxes of trauma. (p. 5)

This perceived link between literature and psychoanalytic thinking has strong implications for how trauma could or should be represented in literature, or, as [Bond and Craps \(2020\)](#) put it, “[t]rauma theorists often justify their focus on anti-narrative, non-linear, fragmented forms by pointing to similarities with the psychic experience of trauma” (p. 112). Anne [Whitehead \(2004\)](#), for example, discusses the significant overlap between literature and trauma, and the ways in which novelists are inspired by trauma theory or mimic trauma symptoms in their fiction (p. 3). [Whitehead \(2004\)](#) notes that “Caruth’s conceptualization of trauma for narrative fiction” implies that trauma fiction “requires a literary form which departs from conventional linear sequence” (p. 6).

This emphasis on trauma as a temporal disjuncture mirrors elements of both Freud’s and Janet’s theories. In their earliest configuration of the cause of hysteria, [Breuer et al. \(\[1893\] 1957\)](#) regarded symptoms of hysteria-cum-trauma as violent eruptions into the psyche—soma of dissociated memory fragments. [Freud \(\[1896\] 1962\)](#) later attributed trauma to the reappearance of a repressed memory, or fantasy, gaining traumatizing potential when it resurfaced in a mind that possessed the ability to grasp its meaning. Following the First World War, [Freud \(\[1920\] 1961\)](#) tried to understand what he considered a compulsion to repeat observed in flashbacks and recurring dreams. In his late work *Moses and Monotheism* ([Freud 1939](#)), he gave a speculative anthropological account of collective trauma, which accords with the understanding of it as a return of the repressed ([Eickhoff 2006](#)). Janet’s understanding begins with the observation that the psyche can normally synthesize a wealth of perceptual and kinesthetic information, which is stored meaningfully. Traumatic events cause the synthesizing function to fail, leading to traumas being stored as ‘free-floating’ fragments, consisting of affects, sense impressions, or mental images. They cannot be reflected upon, compared, and contrasted with other information, but function dissociatively beyond conscious volition ([Howell 2013](#), pp. 50–62).

Despite early criticism of Caruth’s approach (e.g., [Leys 2000](#), pp. 266–97), the influence of Freud’s and Janet’s theories of trauma on Caruth’s writing has contributed to the prioritization of a relatively small canon of trauma fiction from writers who favor the aesthetics of fragmentation and incomprehensibility and avoid narrative closure. This aesthetic choice can be traced back to Caruth’s theorizing of “trauma as an overwhelming experience that resists integration and expression, which is translated in fiction into a ‘textual ‘undecidability’ or ‘unreadability [. . .]’ to reflect the inaccessibility of trauma” ([Craps 2014](#), p. 45). The preference for anti-narrative in literature and the distrust of alternative forms of temporality and narrative integration remain dominant in the discussion of trauma fiction by many literary critics, even as revisions to trauma theory flourish in psychoanalytic circles, as discussed below. Thus, there remains a discrepancy in the assessment of narrative between cultural or literary theory and psychoanalytic discourse, with the former “concerned to sustain irresolution and disjuncture [. . .] view[ing] narrative with suspicion [. . .]” ([Bond and Craps 2020](#), p. 113; see also [Luckhurst 2008](#), p. 82), while the objective of the latter is to develop an environment that is conducive to the processing and narrativization of traumatic experiences.

The rather narrow approach to how trauma could or should be represented in literature has been challenged by critics, who point to trauma fiction outside of this prescriptive “canon of approved trauma literature” ([Gibbs 2014](#), p. 26), including popular trauma texts, realist novels, or video games. As [Bond and Craps \(2020\)](#) put it, “[a]nother new direction in cultural trauma research is a tendency to study texts that deviate from the modernist aesthetic of fragmentation and discontinuity” (p. 112). There are many novelists who challenge some of these conventions and look to other subjects and perspectives. Bond and Craps nonetheless note the following ([Bond and Craps 2020](#)):

Realist and indigenous writing in particular rarely make the cut, as they often depart from the unspeakability paradigm, featuring witnesses who claim narrative and political agency rather than being passive, inarticulate victims. (p. 113)

The two novels discussed below broadly fall into this category of realist writing. Both “deviate from the modernist aesthetic of fragmentation and discontinuity” (Bond and Craps 2020, p. 112) by highlighting the role of knowledge and narrative-making, community, and plurality, as well as relying on realist aesthetics to represent the traumatic experience of their protagonists. In doing so, we argue, they parallel more contemporary lines of psychoanalytic theorization, as articulated in relational perspectives.

2.2. Perspectives from Relational Psychoanalysis

Relational psychoanalytic perspectives were developed during the 1970s and 1980s due to the influence of broad societal movements such as feminism and the New Left (Orbach 2014, p. 13), as well as various countercultural movements (Seligman 2019). Relational psychoanalysis brings together a wide array of psychoanalytic theories, including Freud’s and Sandor Ferenczi’s, as well as self-psychology, interpersonal approaches, and object relations theory. Relational psychoanalysis was initially most clearly articulated in Stephen Mitchell’s influential 1988 publication *Relational Concepts in Psychoanalysis*, and this is now a vast field of clinical practice and academic study. This section sketches out those elements of relational perspectives that parallel the themes, narratives, and literary forms of the chosen works. For the purpose of clarity, these are divided into three distinct foci: the view of the analyst’s position in the therapeutic relationship, including their way of working; the rethinking of the structure of the psyche which has allowed for a renewed interest in dissociation; and the approach to working with extrapsychic material, which is associated with emerging metatheorization on socio-cultural facets of psychoanalytic theory and practice.

Whilst classical psychoanalysis is philosophically rooted in positivism, as conceptualized in the late 1800s, the philosophical underpinning of relational psychoanalysis is social constructivism (Mitchell 1988, pp. 17–40). The classical intra-psychic view of development, as mobilized by intra-individual drives which become expressed and frustrated in a search for self-expression, is replaced by a view where the social context is endowed with ontological primacy (Orbach 2014, p. 13; Mitchell 1988, p. 17). A child is viewed as having a social-cum-public self before they have a private one, meaning that relationships have formative influences on intra-individual development. Whilst this sounds anything but groundbreaking, at the cusp of the second quarter of the twenty-first century—the time of Mitchell’s writing in the 1980s—it had “major implications for all aspects of psychoanalytic theorizing” (Mitchell 1988, p. 25). It comprehensively transformed the power dynamics between patient and therapist.

The patient is not viewed as a passive “other”, arriving ready and able to receive a “therapeutic gaze”, but as an active agent in the process and co-creator of the therapeutic relationship (Orbach 2014, pp. 13–14). The patient’s internalized ways of relating shape the analytic relationship, but the objective is not to work backwards to the moment of developmental aberration, as it broadly speaking is in classical ways of working, but to explore these dynamics, contextualize and historicize them, and play with ways of transforming them (Mitchell 1988, pp. 161–63).

Despite the view of the analyst as a blank screen being revised and challenged multiple times since Freud (Hoffman 1983), elements of it survive in practice today. Relational approaches highlight that, like the patient, the analyst is a conglomeration of the social relations which have shaped them, and the ways of responding to and making meaning of those relations that they have developed (Orbach 2014, pp. 13–14). They cannot be only an observer to the patient’s psychic reality because their perceptual and cognitive processes are filtered through layers of subjectivity. Hence, the therapist is an active co-participant in the therapeutic relationship and, to paraphrase Susie Orbach (2014), uses an open, reflective curiosity in place of detached observation (p. 14). Much of what a therapist does today,

Orbach writes, does not constitute interpretations but “simple interventions, attempts at understanding, connecting, sense making and so on” (p. 26 n7). Each exchange between the patient and therapist is perceived as unique to the relationship, to the situation, and to the juncture at which it occurs. This calls for the therapist to reflect on their feelings about each exchange without normatively preformed assumptions and precludes the use of “off the shelf” (Orbach 2014, p. 14) interpretations, which remain commonplace.

A patient’s internalized ways of relating are important components of their identity. Theories and metaphors of identity construction and the structure of the psyche abound within psychoanalysis. A key consideration is whether identity and consciousness are conceived of as naturally unitary, or as multifaceted and fragmented. Both Freud’s topographical and structural views of the psyche tend toward the former, whilst relational perspectives have embraced models that align more with the latter. Mitchell (1991) regards the self and identity as naturally “multiplex and discontinuous” (p. 121). This polypsychic view has allowed for dissociation, as a process and means of defense, to be more fully considered (it cannot easily be accommodated or theorized when consciousness is conceived of as unitary). Freud tended to use the term repression rather than dissociation, and while the two concepts have co-existed within psychoanalysis, dissociative processes have themselves been less widely studied (Howell 2013, p. vii). Repression and dissociation share some features in terms of capturing reactions to aversive, unconscious material. Both are important in psychodynamic theorizing on the subject of trauma. Repression may be thought to describe content that was once conscious but had to be ejected, whereas dissociation captures the dynamics of material that has not yet been represented (Howell 2013, p. 199).

Dissociation is at the heart of the work of Philip Bromberg, where it is considered a regular psychological process, rather than solely pathological (Bromberg 2011, p. 49). For current purposes, the concept of “self-states” is of particular importance and this concept is used by Bromberg (2011, p. 15), as well as relational thinkers more broadly (see Craige 2023, pp. 468–71). Self-states are ways of being–thinking–feeling, of which the psyche naturally has many, and they function quite independently, that is to say dissociatively. When different self-states are recognized by important others during development, they become affectively and cognitively represented, that is “symbolized” (Bromberg 2011, p. 52). An important premise in Bromberg’s (2011) thinking is that “intersubjectivity” (p. 14) is tantamount to healthy psychological functioning. This refers to a capacity to view oneself as others do without losing sight—that is, dissociating—of how one views oneself. Intersubjectivity thus entails a capacity to recognize a wide range of self-states as ‘me’, a capacity to appreciate another’s subjective viewpoint of self, and withstand the conflict between the two. Intersubjectivity entails “the ability to stand in the spaces between realities without losing any of them” (Bromberg 1995, p. 195). It captures a fluid capacity to simultaneously relate to multiple, divergent narratives of self.

Trauma creates ruptures between self-states. When affects, thoughts, and behaviors are repeatedly disconfirmed, they cannot be symbolized, and become experienced as too ‘other’ and dangerous to be acknowledged. They are kept at bay from consciousness, functioning pathologically as dissociated “structures” (Bromberg 2011, p. 49). Some function as alerts to danger, so when a situation triggers a traumatized memory, it can be automatically averted by the mobilization of a different self-state. As all social environments entail some limits on what can be recognized and symbolized, everyone has some traumatized self-states, but differences occur in the force with which they must be kept at bay, the degree of conflict created in the mind between them, and how unsymbolized they are (Bromberg 2011, p. 14). When self-states function structurally, they dictate the aspects of the external environment that can be perceived and interacted with and “other people are simply actors in whichever mental representation of reality defines the self-state that exists at the moment” (Bromberg 1995, p. 193).

Bromberg’s view of dissociation has important implications for therapeutic work, which are paralleled in the construction of trauma and healing found in the narrative

of Appignanesi's *The Memory Man*. Bromberg emphasizes the primacy of what occurs between the therapist and patient, with particular attention being paid to the moments when something changes, be it the subject the patient is talking about, perhaps entailing loss of narrative (psychotherapists are often faced with the patient asking, 'what was I saying again?'), or the ambience within the session shifting. These transitions indicate that the patient is switching between self-states and powerfully indicate ruptures between these states. An important part of this process is for the therapist to note these moments and to enable the articulation of what occurs unconsciously in them. This is achieved relationally through the therapeutic dyad, with the participants finding ways to creatively symbolize the dissociated material together. By sharing some of their subjective observations as they unfold during the work, the therapist affectively communicates to the patient that they are holding many self-states in mind at once (Bromberg 1995, pp. 189–95). Through this, the therapist encourages different self-states to articulate their viewpoints and their conflict becomes conscious. This enables "a perceptual link to be made in the patient's working memory between the dissociated and the here-and-now self as the agent or the experiencer" (Bromberg 2011, p. 22). In the long term, this collaborative articulation of disparate narratives enables links to be established between 'the me now' and other self-states. The formerly disjunctive self-states thereby become cognitively and affectively symbolized and can be recognized as 'me', creating the capacity to "stand in the spaces" (Bromberg 1995, p. 195). This view of analytic work as enhancing psychological growth and a felt sense of agency has been echoed by other relational thinkers (see Craige 2023).

The shifting views of the therapist's position and function within the dyad extend to the awareness of the interplay between broader conscious and unconscious socio-cultural dynamics, which is mirrored in the themes and narrative construction of Fornà's *The Memory of Love*. Philip Cushman (1990, 1996) and Neil Altman (2004, 2009) both argue that issues pertaining to culture, history, ethnicity, race, gender, class, and so on, reverberate through the therapeutic space and ought to be acknowledged as valid and important issues for therapeutic work. Cushman (1996) has criticized the failure of psychoanalysis to acknowledge the impact of socio-cultural factors on identity and pathology. The claim of psychoanalysis to medical objectivity has implicitly allowed the practice to conceive of itself as an apolitical and universal form of treatment and allowed for the development of a view of the self as ahistorical and acontextual. Altman (2009) observes that when socio-cultural issues are reduced to a language of drives and defenses that reflect the patient's intra-psychic world, their impact cannot be narrativized or understood within the therapeutic process (pp. 86–90).

The class and ethnicity demographics within the psychotherapeutic professions remain skewed (e.g., British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy 2022), but as this summary demonstrates, the awareness of this issue dates back many decades. Commentators have engaged with issues of socially mediated power imbalances, and how to work with them therapeutically. Whilst 'early' psychoanalysis sought to establish itself as a sanitized, positivist, and medical pursuit, the prevailing view today is that it is a messy, relational process requiring the active participation of at least two parties. The parties are not only shaped by familial dynamics, but by social ones that inevitably impact the therapeutic process and require willing, thoughtful, and careful articulation and processing by all participants. Ignoring the external world of the patient by considering material to be purely intra-psychic risks replicating the very power structures which have contributed to the suffering from which the patient is seeking amelioration.

3. Expert Realism? Creating Narratives in Trauma Fiction by Lisa Appignanesi and Aminatta Forna

Michael Rothberg (2000) has extensively theorized the limits and possibilities of realist depictions and anti-realist critiques of the Shoah in his *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*, while Robert Eaglestone (2008) highlights the strong urgency for agency, communication, and, ultimately, the possibilities of resilience, growth, and healing

in many African postcolonial trauma novels. Eaglestone (2008) notes that in these novels, “there is a real sense that there can be comprehension, that a story must be told and can and should be grasped by others” (p. 82).

The two novels we discuss, despite their thematic differences, share this “real sense that there can be comprehension”. Both are clearly influenced by psychiatric and psychoanalytic views of trauma, incorporating and highlighting a scientific discourse of knowledge. This is exemplified by their protagonists, who are experts in the clinical fields discussed at the core of the novels’ thematic focus: Appignanesi’s Bruno Lind is not only a survivor of the Shoah, but a renowned scientist specializing in memory research, and Forna’s Adrian Lockheart is a British psychologist with a special interest in trauma.

We examine several aspects in which these texts both challenge and add to the views on trauma, as represented in texts included in the ‘trauma canon’. This is achieved by investigating the possibilities of collaborative narrative-making and psychological growth as responses to trauma. By emphasizing community and plurality as responses to trauma, both texts prioritize the processing and integration of trauma over a depiction of it as unspeakable or unknowable psychic pain.

3.1. *Plurality of Perspectives and Self-States in Lisa Appignanesi’s The Memory Man*

At the beginning of *The Memory Man*, neurologist Bruno Lind arrives in Vienna to take part in a conference on memory. Returning to his childhood home, he suffers an accident that triggers memories of an attack by Hitler Youth members when he was a boy, an event which “he had altogether forgotten” (Appignanesi [2004] 2008, p. 13). This serves as the inciting incident that sets the whole plot of the novel in motion. The accident leads Bruno’s adopted African-American daughter Amelia to join him from the USA and causes him to connect closely with Polish journalist Irena as well as fellow scientist Alexander Tarski—who are both connected to Bruno’s past. The four set out on a road trip to Poland to unearth the memories that Bruno has “altogether forgotten”. While Appignanesi is drawing on classical psychoanalysis in this work, relational psychoanalytic perspectives illuminate it slightly differently.

During the trip, Bruno comes to the realization that he had actively forgotten or misremembered certain episodes of his survival in war-torn Poland: “[h]is personal memory had functioned in the spirit of what collective memory had made of the time” (p. 248). This element of the narrative illustrates two aspects of relational perspectives. First, the character gains the capacity to articulate a hitherto implicit, collectively constructed aspect of his identity. He comes to question this received memory, arriving at the insight that his personal memory had become overridden by the “collective” narrative of “death and guilty terror” (p. 248) and of an overbearing conflict between Poles and Jews. The received narrative “had displaced much of the lived and daily reality” (p. 248) of his own experiences, including acts of solidarity between the two groups. Second, this recovery cannot be accomplished in solitude, but needs to be shared, co-created, and interpersonally affirmed and validated.

A pivotal moment is the return to the former home of Bruno’s grandparents in the Polish countryside, where Bruno witnessed the murder of his mother and sister in 1942. Struggling to locate the house after all this time, Bruno comes to question the necessity of finding it—he “no longer even knew why it had come into his head that he needed to find the house” (p. 167). Bruno’s memories of observing the murders are triggered by seeing the apple tree, now “gnarled” and “old” (p. 173), where his younger self had buried their bodies. The events of the murder are related from the younger Bruno’s perspective in the next chapter, which takes place in 1942 and ends with the enormity of young Bruno’s loss (p. 187). The following chapter is told from Irena’s contemporary perspective and engages with the aftermath of the loss, how to memorialize it, and how to enable it to be known by others.

To gain the ‘full picture’ of the loss and to transform it into a memory that can be symbolized in narrative, the character’s previously unsymbolized experience needs to be interpersonally reaffirmed and processed in a constant exchange with other characters.

Whilst Bruno is initially depicted as unaware of many self-states, the creative, collaborative symbolization of the various characters enables the previously unbearable intra-psychic conflict to become conscious. The novel achieves this first through multiperspectival narration: while Bruno is the main focalizer, other chapters are narrated from Irena's point of view, adding to or challenging Bruno's perspective. Second, the novel operates on different timelines: Bruno's different, contemporary self-states—expressed, for example, through the push to make the journey while simultaneously wishing to stay safe and not uncover traumatic memories—are complemented in chapters that take place in the past from the perspective of young Bruno, whose self is defined by personal loss and devastation, and who has mostly suffered in silence and solitude. While much trauma fiction collapses "temporality and chronology, and narratives are characterised by repetition and indirection" (Whitehead 2004, p. 3), the chapters from Bruno's past—clearly signposted by date and in chronological order—are a valuable addition to the process of collaborative symbolization and historicize, rather than haunt or obscure, the present. It is the collaborative process of remembering that enables the conflict to become knowable to the character and the reader—and here Amelia's insistence on erecting a commemorative stone at the place of the murders is of key significance. Irena observes how Amelia strong-arms the current owners into promising to erect a small monument, imagining "the marker going up in the midst of the flat peaceful countryside. People might stop. Might wonder. Reflect. That was no bad thing" (p. 190). Irena is reflecting both on their group's growing capacity to symbolize the murders in their shared narrative as well as envisioning the future creation of awareness of the event in the "midst" of it all.

All the characters contribute to the shared experience that allows Bruno to eventually make "perceptual links" (Bromberg 2011, p. 22) between the traumatic memories, creating a cohesive, personal narrative. This becomes apparent in the formal closure of the novel as Bruno returns from his trip and goes past Mauthausen, where his father had been murdered. He realizes that he had been there before:

And the site could find no place in his narrative of war, which was a youth's [. . .]. So he had thrust the place away. That visit and the impossibility of containing it in any autobiographical story. He couldn't have gone on if it had lodged there, accessible to everyday recollection. Its enormity was such that he had to put it out of mind or leave his mind. It was too much, coming on top of everything else. (pp. 254–55)

With its precise and almost clinical prose, the language in this passage reflects the novel's highlighting of the concept of knowledgeability. The language demonstrates self-reflexivity, and expresses the protagonist's (and the author's) expertise in trauma memory. This emphasizes the novel's theme of the possibility of gaining comprehension, which is in stark contrast to more traditional trauma literature, as demonstrated above. In this passage, Appignanesi also draws heavily on the Freudian understanding of memory of trauma. The character could not reconcile the "site" with his personal narrative—it needed to be repressed because otherwise it would have shattered his mind. This passage can also be successfully interpreted as an indication of polypsychism, and of Bruno's growing capacity to tolerate the perspectives of multiple self-states. He can connect with his "youth" state, who could not bear the memory of the place and had to split it off, whilst simultaneously demonstrating an ability to represent the memory of it cognitively and tolerate its concomitant affect. His reflection is finally shown to contain both the necessity not to remember, and the actual memory—Bruno has become able to "stand in the spaces" (Bromberg 1995, p. 195). Where the young survivor had found himself unable to engage with this place and know it, the experiences of the journey and assistance of his travel companions enable the character to finally enter that place of memory in the novel's final paragraph:

He stood in front of the sheer rock face and repeated the words: 'Rückkehr unerwünscht' [sic]. Return unwanted. The meaning slipped to encompass him. He had made his own unwanted return. He had returned after too many years

to his father's grave. And it had cleared something in him. Even if it was also the passage to his own death. He allowed the childhood tears, never shed, to roll down his cheeks. It was some kind of small memorial. (p. 256)

Agency, resistance, and resilience are important tools of surviving trauma in Appignanesi's novel, but as this last citation illustrates, these experiences still need to be shared and processed in order to become symbolized in narrative and to allow a—both literal and symbolic—return, for “something in him” to be resolved.¹ This possibility of resolution—not necessarily a neat solution, but “something” to be cleared, “some kind” of commemoration and knowledge—is a juxtaposition between the texts discussed here and more traditional trauma texts which, according to Anne Whitehead, question “whether the ghosts of the past can be exorcised” and critique the predominant premise of “working through” found in psychoanalysis (Whitehead 2004, p. 7). Both novels demonstrate how more intricate, clinical knowledge can enrich the depiction of trauma. They propose narrative closure, thereby moving beyond the either/or of exorcising the ghosts of the past or being eternally haunted by them. Instead, they examine how it might become possible to *live with* the ghosts of the past, paralleling the capacity to “stand in the spaces” (Bromberg 1995, p. 195) and tolerate ego-dystonic affect. We have shown how, in *The Memory Man*, this possibility of healing and closure hinges on shared, collaborative knowledge and is not possible without a plurality of different perspectives—a theme that is also predominant in Forna's novel *The Memory of Love*.

3.2. Self-Reflexivity and Cultural Contextualization in Aminatta Forna's *The Memory of Love*

A substantial part of Forna's novel is dedicated to English psychologist Adrian Lockhart's budding, and terrifying, realization that—while he had come to Sierra Leone to help patients recover after the horrors of the civil war—he is actually “neither wanted nor needed” there, an idea that “had simply never occurred to him” (Forna [2010] 2011, p. 320). His friend, the Sierra Leonean surgeon Kai, is critical of the motivations of those arriving from the West, reflecting on the “errantry that brought them here, flooding in through the gaping wound left by the war, lascivious in their eagerness. [. . .] Modern-day knights, each after his or her trophy, their very own Holy Grail” (p. 219). Unlike Appignanesi's protagonists, Forna's Sierra Leonean characters live in the immediate aftermath of the war and Adrian wants to help the local population to return “to some degree of normality” (p. 318) through therapy. He largely fails, and his failing, together with the personal development he undergoes, has strong parallels with the reactions to and theoretical developments of the relational perspectives covered above.

Forna's critique of culturally insensitive applications of therapies has been commented on previously (see Mukherjee 2022, p. 37). In his discussion of Adrian as a “conduit” (Craps 2014, p. 52) for the experiences of the Sierra Leonean characters, Craps (2014) not only reflects on the psychologist's inability to help his patients with culturally constructed “therapeutic models” (p. 52), but often to connect to them at all (pp. 52–54). Adrian is shown, for example, to be largely unable to comprehend the silence he encounters as a “valid way of surviving the suffering inflicted by the war” (Craps 2014, p. 55; see also Mukherjee 2022, pp. 45–46). Instead, while the character is described as being aware that “the notion that a conversation is a continuous act is bred into his bones and silences like nudity should be covered up lest they offend” (p. 48), Adrian nonetheless assumes therapeutic narrativization to be superior, thereby tacitly accepting its universal applicability (p. 321). He lacks an open and interested attitude to the silence he encounters, does not endeavor to understand its function within time or place, and is not shown to reflect on how breaking it would enable healing, at least at first. In order to form connections that facilitate healing, Adrian needs to learn how to read the silences, not as pathological, but as a “coping mechanism, a conscious choice” (Craps 2014, p. 55) necessitated by lived experiences and cultural context. The Sierra Leoneans he encounters “elect muteness, the only way of complying and resisting at the same time” (p. 322). This applies to all with the exception

of Adrian's first patient, the only person actively requesting his help: dying academic Elias Cole.

Elias' sessions with Adrian take the form of a historical, chronologically coherent narrative, beginning in the late 1960s. Similarly to the chapters from Bruno's past in *The Memory Man*, these add clarity to the present narrative, rather than signaling an "irruption of one time into another" or "depart[ing] from conventional linear sequence" (Whitehead 2004, p. 6). Initially, these chapters seem to run parallel to the contemporary plot without any clear connection. Adrian is not only shown to lack the capacity to appreciate the historical structures and narratives which have shaped Elias' formulation of his story, but even suggests that "it is not my place to make moral judgements" (p. 351). This indicates that the character views the therapeutic process as acontextual and Elias' self as ahistorical, encapsulated, and universal. Over the course of the novel, additional chapters from Kai's perspective and insights offered from Elias' daughter Mamakay shed doubt on Elias' version of events. While Elias presents himself as a victim of circumstance, his involvement as police spy and collaborator is finally disclosed to Adrian and the reader.

Mamakay confronts Adrian and his role in creating Elias' comforting and one-sided narrative, accusing Adrian of aiding her father in writing "his own version of history" (p. 351). She describes Adrian as "a mirror" her father "can hold up to reflect a version of himself and events", in a process that she claims is taking place across the entire country (p. 351). The choice of "mirror" as a metaphor for what Adrian is to Elias can also be read as a critique of the function of the therapist as a blank screen who reflects the patient's material. In this instance, this attitude of detachment, with its associated downplaying of the therapist's inevitable assistance in narrative creation, is used to mobilize a critique of Adrian. The character is a stand-in for the foreigners who, through their failure to educate themselves on the history of the country they are purporting to return to "normality" (p. 318), unwittingly assist in the construction of a narrative that absolves perpetrators of their guilt. As Mamakay asserts: "Whatever you say, you will go away from here, you will publish your papers and give talks, and every time you do you will make their version of events the more real, until it becomes indelible" (p. 351). Adrian, and the group of people he represents, do not aid the healing from trauma by facilitating the local population in their shared meaning-making, but instead contribute to a trajectory of oppression and silencing.

The second storyline revolves around the question of silence and communal narrative-making as culturally specific responses to traumatic experiences and concerns Agnes, "Adrian's holy grail" (p. 219). Agnes seeks out Adrian in the hospital and is described by locals as "a crazy woman" with no family (p. 22). Adrian discovers that Agnes shifts between clarity and confusion, leaving her family home for long periods of time during which she wanders the country, and which she has difficulties recalling later. While the locals who know her describe her as "crossed", Adrian comes to the conclusion that she suffers from dissociative fugue, a condition that entails sudden traveling, followed by amnesia (pp. 112–16, 161–64). Adrian does not situate Agnes within her cultural and temporal context but "synchronizes Agnes's behavior to Eurocentric taxonomies" (Mukherjee 2022, p. 43).

Failing to enable Agnes to gain insight into her trauma, Adrian only finds out the truth of her condition after leaving Sierra Leone. It is Kai who uncovers the truth behind Agnes' wandering, not through speaking with her alone, but through piecing together a complete picture of her life's situation with the help of many community members. Kai returns to Agnes' town without Adrian, and when word spreads, several neighbors assemble to convey her story:

Each person told a part of the same story. And in telling another's story, they told their own. Kai took what they had given him and placed it together with what he already knew and those things Adrian had told him. (p. 306)

Whilst Adrian's way of working mirrors the power relations of classical psychoanalysis, and he endeavors to fit Agnes' symptoms into a pre-existing framework, Kai adopts a more relational approach. He allows an understanding of Agnes' symptoms to emerge

collaboratively and through the individually tailored production of meaning. He slowly and sensitively pieces Agnes' story and the community's story together, and is shown to have an implicit understanding of and respect for the prevailing cultural responses to trauma. The language of the passage also reflects the theme of silence discussed earlier. Unlike the notion of 'breaking the silence' that guides many of Adrian's early encounters with his Sierra Leonean patients and "their reluctance to talk about anything that had happened to them" (p. 321), Kai is comfortable moving within the silence that Adrian only later learns "to understand [as] part of a way of being that existed here" (p. 321). Agnes' story is thus not only told communally "from the lips of many" (p. 306), but significantly "in hushed voices [...] in a quiet room and in the eye of night" (p. 306). Silence and "muteness" are built into the act of testifying, and become incorporated into the narrative, rather than having to be "broken" in order for the narrative to be formed. Not unlike in *The Memory Man*, Agnes' trauma cannot be processed or narrated by her alone, nor is it attributed to her intra-psychic pathology. It needs to be articulated from multiple viewpoints in order to reflect the narrative of the community. While Adrian's method plays a small role in the recovery of Agnes' story, its articulation is depicted as requiring knowledge and awareness of time and place, which echoes the critiques of classical psychoanalytic approaches proposed by Cushman (1990, 1996) and Altman (2004, 2009), who both argue that psychoanalysis has tended to collapse differences and to assume universalism.

4. Forms of Knowing: The Role of Realist Aesthetics in Creating Comprehension

Appignanesi and Forna critically and creatively interrogate and widen the ways in which literature can represent trauma, memory, and dissociative processes. Both engage with developing medical and therapeutic discourses, thereby going beyond the efforts of Caruth, Felman, and others. As we have shown, the question of how to engage with traumatic experiences, verbalize them, and pass on memory, is the explicit focus of both novels. The emphases on survival, resilience, and growth as possible outcomes of engaging with traumatic memories also echoes recent trends in cultural memory studies and trauma studies that seek "to recover memories of hope and optimism in commemorative practices" (Kennedy 2020, p. 56).

Both novels utilize the realist aesthetic to highlight a sense that comprehension is possible. By showing their characters as capable of knowingly engaging with their traumatic experiences, and by making protagonists knowledgeable specialists in trauma and memory, both texts demonstrate possibilities other than unspeakable suffering and immutable dissociation.

Both texts prioritize a language of knowledge and expertise, and challenge cultural trauma theory's tendency to favor anti-narrative and experimental modernist textual strategies (Craps 2014, pp. 50–51), which might be the cause of some of the criticism levelled at both novels. Comparing Appignanesi's novel to several autobiographies and a fantasy novel, Julia Pascal (2004) notes "a glaring disparity" with regards to the former, while commenting that her prose "feels rather stiff" compared to the latter. Craps (2014) mentions that many critics felt that the link between the three male protagonists through their shared love for Mamakay in *The Memory of Love* was "somewhat too neatly" created (p. 52). This criticism could be levelled against the revealed connections between the characters at the heart of *The Memory Man* as well. While more conventional trauma fiction "demands of the reader a suspension of disbelief and novelists frequently draw on the supernatural" (Whitehead 2004, p. 85), these two novels tend to explain these connections or links "neatly" or "stiffly". Those links are considered and reflected upon—connections are rational and comprehensible, rather than being "troubled by coincidences and fantastic elements" (Whitehead 2004, p. 85).

Both texts also highlight the role of community and plurality in this creation of comprehension and knowledge. Paralleling the processing of trauma in the view of dissociation within relational psychoanalysis, reflection, and knowledge becomes possible through multiperspectivity. Both texts feature chapters that are narrated from different points of

view and from different temporal angles. The chapters that take place in the past do not haunt but illuminate the present, exemplified by the chapters relating Bruno's search for the unmarked graves, and the gradual revelation of Elias' complicity. These provide a parallel to the view of the patient's emerging way of relating within the relational dyad, where the objective is not to work backwards but to historicize the present. Through the inclusion of different, sometimes contrasting perspectives, a view on trauma as not solely an individual experience, but as embedded in fluid social and cultural settings, is developed. Both novels also highlight the ways in which traumatic experiences are shaped by the environment in which they occur.

Significantly, both texts also feature endings in which narrativization can and does bring reconciliation and knowledge. Bruno's journey in *The Memory Man* ends with his deep contemplation of the workings of his own individual memory and collective memory—or, to put it in Bromberg's terms, with him developing the capacity to see his own perspective and the perspective of 'the other', in this case, the collective—and with the character facing the place of his father's murder and deeply hidden pain. *The Memory of Love* concludes with Kai confronting and incorporating his traumatic memories of the war and with his letter to Adrian in which the true reasons behind Agnes' wanderings are disclosed. The letter contains "[e]verything Adrian had known must be true but had never been able to discover, never been able to prove" (p. 441). While neither text shows a singular solution to the diverse and multiple manifestations and forms of trauma, both clearly prioritize the possibilities of collaborative narrative construction in order to allow symbolization, enabling different forms of healing and resilience as responses to trauma.

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Note

- ¹ The meaning of the National Socialist code for extermination—return unwanted—not only encompasses Bruno's "own unwanted return" but also seems to allude to the return of the repressed—both of Bruno's own painful memories as well as collectively repressed and unwanted memory in Austria and Poland and the changing discourse regarding memory culture in these countries as exemplified in the novel by the erection of the memorial on previously unmarked graves discussed earlier.

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