Writing Wrongs:

Historical Injury and the Contemporary Novel

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THESIS

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SUMMARY

This project reframes contemporary engagements with past injury by attending to the way novelists since the 1990s have responded to the widening temporal divides that separate us from various landmark atrocities of the twentieth century. Though “historical trauma” has been foundational and useful in articulating how injuries like the Holocaust and the legacy of apartheid shape individual and collective identifications, I contend that trauma theory’s commitment to identity claims has made it an increasingly inadequate framework for understanding the complicated way that these past crimes continue to resonate in the present. Presenting “historical injury” as a productive reframing of the concept of historical trauma, my readings of Phillip Roth, J.M. Coetzee and W.G. Sebald illustrate the way in which historical injury shapes the affective contours of everyday experience. Championing a new materialist approach to historical injury, one that replaces narratives of trauma with intensities of affect, I suggest that historical injury must be understood not as belonging to identity but as mediated by the self-transformative capacities of embodiment.

Beginning with a reflection on contemporary Holocaust memory, this project examines the ways in which an affective relation to injury may challenge established cultural narratives of identity in both Jewish-American and German contexts. In my final chapter, I explore how affective frameworks for thinking about the historical injury of the Holocaust may be put to productive use in articulating past injury in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. Though the authors under consideration approach the problem of historical injury from vastly different perspectives, they all share, I argue, a critique of reading practices that attempt to understand the past through acts of sympathetic identification with trauma’s victims. The trauma model, I argue, in focusing individual psychological effects has limited our ability to articulate the complex
SUMMARY (continued)

ways in which historical injuries manifest themselves within a political present increasingly
distant from the traumatizing event. By paying attention to the embodiment of lived experience, I
suggest, these authors imagine how instances of collective memory can be transmitted outside of
established identity claims and against normative structures of temporality and geography.
1. INTRODUCTION: AFFECT AND MATERIALITY

1.1 “Never Forget”

Though the imperative to “never forget” historical injury has dominated the discourse of global catastrophe since the end of World War II, in recent years, and particularly after 9/11, the phrase has become an increasingly influential motto for the new millennium. Above all, the warning to “never forget” not only recognizes that past injury has a place in the political present, but also demands responsibility towards a past that is nonetheless difficult to define. What precisely is this slogan asking us to remember? By what means and in what contexts can past injury be addressed in the present? This project takes as its focus the problem of what I will call “historical injury,” a term that names specifically those injuries that have receded into the past—with many dating back several generations—yet, whose effects continue to resonate in the present. But what is at stake in the problem of historical injury is not merely how we record and remember it, but also how we respond to it legally, politically, and ethically. Contemporary justice claims become especially vexed when the passage of time obscures the perpetrator and victim binaries on which any justice framework depends. Who can claim to be the victim of historical injury? On what social, cultural or personal basis can justice claims survive in the present? Moreover, can historical injury ever be said to have been properly redressed?

Since the 1980s, scholars have articulated the problem of historical injury using the theoretical tools of trauma studies. The notion that traumatic memory haunts the present has been explored in literary fiction as well. Thus, in her 1987 novel Beloved Toni Morrison has imagined the continuing presence of slavery as a living memory, embodied by the ghost of Sethe’s dead baby daughter. Though the novel concludes that the story of slavery “was not a story to pass on” (Morrison 323), the responsibility that accompanies this memory, it is implied, belongs not only
to Sethe’s daughter Denver but extends to the reader as well. Critiquing Morrison’s notion of “rememory,” Walter Benn Michaels argues that the problem with conceiving of “history as a kind of memory is that things we are said to remember are things that we did or experienced, whereas things that are said to belong to our history tend to be things that were neither done nor experienced by us” (135). Thus, he later concludes that, when evaluating the present impact of past wrongs, “no one’s history need be taken into account” as “the question of past injustice has no bearing on the question of present justice” (166). Michaels argues, in other words, that because memory needs to be experienced rather than generationally passed down, historical injury can have little legitimate bearing on the present.

While it may be tempting to dismiss any claims of past injury on the basis of its conflation of history and memory, I want to suggest that the lived experience of historical injury is more complex than Michaels’ model allows, manifesting not in the traumatic rememory but in the affective contours of contemporary political crises. Injury, I will suggest, continues to exist as systemic oppression, shaping the political status quo in American, transnational, and postcolonial contexts. For example, in the chapters that follow, I argue that questions of historical injury are at the heart of the race-relations in postapartheid South Africa and, though certainly less politically contested today, Germany’s relationship towards its troubling past and its continuing political, social, and financial responsibilities towards the victims of the Holocaust.

Moreover, the definition of justice that Michaels draws on is a narrow one that understands redress exclusively as financial recompense. As Nancy Fraser has argued, any contemporary justice framework must be sensitive to issues of recognition and representation in
addition to redistribution. How injury can be addressed, however, is complex and present justice

claims

routinely run up against counterclaims whose underlying ontological assumptions they do not share. For example, movements demanding economic redistribution often clash not only with defenders of the economic status quo, but also with movements seeking recognition of group specificity, on the one hand, and with those seeking new schemes of political representation, on the other. In such cases, the question is not simply, redistribution: pro or con? Nor even, redistribution: how much or how little? Where claimants hold conflicting views of the substance of justice, another question is also at issue: redistribution or recognition or representation? (3)

These often conflicting beliefs about what constitutes justice trouble any simple resolution of historical injury. However, before we can develop a justice framework that can account for how historical injury can or should be redressed, it is important to find an articulation for the way in which historical injury constitutes present experience. Thus, while questions of justice animate and drive this project, my main task is to develop a critical vocabulary for thinking historical injury’s continued resonance in the present. This project asks, in other words, whether there is a way of “never forgetting” that gets around the problem, as Michaels puts it, of turning “history” into “memory.”

To answer this question, I turn to three contemporary novels by authors who have begun to rethink the vocabulary available for conceiving of the problem of historical injury. All three—Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* (2004), W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* (2001), and J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999)—implicitly critique the way the language of trauma and memory has dominated critical engagement with the problem of historical injury. Rejecting the binary in which historical injury either survives through narrative or must be rejected as deserving little critical attention, I argue, these authors propose an alternative set of questions through which to
consider the relevance of historical injury in the present, one that takes into account the embodied experience of injury.

Situating my approach in the space between trauma theory’s attachment to the past event and Michaels’ excessively forward-looking approach, this project attempts to map a new way of understanding historical injury. Thus, I move away from the language of trauma and towards a reading practice that is attuned to historical injury’s affective dimensions. Throughout, I recognize the problem of historical injury as one that asserts two seemingly contradictory claims: while injury is always an individual embodied experience that is singular and localized in space and time, its effects are distributive and wide-ranging, signifying far beyond their original context. Drawing on the language of affect, I attempt to articulate the exchange between embodied experience as both internal and external to the subject. Because affective experience is situated simultaneously inside and outside of the body, it provides a link between the subjectivity of the experience of embodied memory and the subject-less notion of history. Thus, I suggest, affect enables a method of “knowing” the past that transcends conventional temporal, physical, and narrative boundaries, allowing us to contend with the continued relevance of past historical injuries without allowing our present to be overdetermined by them.

In the chapters that follow, I develop a framework that replaces trauma theory’s emphasis on individual psychology with reading practices that are attuned to the affective transmission of historical experience. Considering the way historical injury continues to resonate in the present, I pay particular attention to the temporality of injury. Challenging the trauma model’s imagining of injury as sudden violent disruption, I show instead how these authors conceive of historical injury as integral to ordinary experience. By expanding on affect theory’s potential to engage with historical injury’s present-ness in ordinary experience, I attempt to reframe the memory of
historical injury not as a desire for collective memory of the past, but as an experience of the past within the present that is inescapable even for those who would prefer to forget. I argue that it is through an “affective reading practice,” one that is sensitive to the embodied materiality of lived experience, that we might begin to address historical injury in the present.

1.2 Toward a Affective Approach to Historical Injury

Before explaining what I mean by an affective reading practice, I will first describe how standard reading practices, in relying on frameworks of trauma, have been insufficient in addressing the problem of historical injury. When trauma theory was first developed in the 1980s, it specifically addressed the experience of Holocaust survivors, emphasizing the psychological effects on the victims of trauma. In her important book Testimony—coauthored with Dori Laub—Shoshana Felman has described the incompleteness of traumatic memory: “[t]rauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect” (69). In this way, trauma is never past; rather, the initial traumatic rupture is a site that is always unfinished, continually recreated and fashioned anew with each testimony. Though it defines the present, the traumatic experience is inaccessible to language, even to the traumatized person herself. Thus, as Cathy Caruth writes:

trauma seems to be so much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language. (4)
Caruth stresses in particular the way in which trauma operates unconsciously, and is thus rendered inaccessible to conscious memory. It is for this reason that trauma resists conscious articulation and narrative structures. But while trauma theory provides a productive framework for engaging with the psychological effects of injury, its focus on individual experience has limited our ability to articulate the complex ways in which trauma may be understood to affect those who have not themselves experienced it.

Every attempt at understanding how trauma survives in subsequent generations has relied in some way on frameworks of language and narrative. One of the more compelling models for thinking about how “trauma” can be understood beyond the confines of subjective singularity is Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory.” Hirsch has theorized the temporal distance that separates us from the Holocaust by developing a framework to account for what she has termed the “second generation” of survivors. For Hirsch, the second generation describes those survivors who were born at the end or shortly after the war, yet whose early childhood experiences have been significantly shaped by it.1 “Postmemory,” she writes, “describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (Hirsch 106).2 Here, narratives of traumatic memory are understood to stand in for actual embodied experiences, as though “constitut[ing] memories in their own right” (106). While Hirsch insists that, like first generation trauma, postmemory “still def[ies] narrative reconstruction and exceed[s] comprehension” (107), she admits that the second generations’ memories are not identical with those of their parents’ and in fact are modified by the very language and narratives that mediate them. Thus, for the second generation, the traumatic memory is often shaped by publicly available images and narratives.3 Far from the
fantasy in which traumatic memories are imagined as transferring from first to second generation, postmemory in fact reveals the extent to which traumatic memory is tied to embodied experience.

If it is difficult for the second generation of survivors to gain an understanding of their parents’ trauma that is not influenced by the historical narratives, public images, and cultural representations, the task seems nearly impossible for those who have no direct connection to the traumatic event. In fact, for many, representations often provide the only avenue for accessing traumatic narratives at all. Therefore, scholars who are committed to understanding the trauma narrative as the bearer of historical memory are rarely deterred by the muddying of authenticity that can result. Instead of acknowledging the incongruence between lived experience and its textual representation, a reading practice focused on trauma, in fact, often seeks to conflate them. In *The Holocaust of Texts*, Amy Hungerford has argued that American postwar literature has tended to personify texts in a way that seemingly erases any distinction between texts and people. It is by understanding texts as people, Hungerford argues, that these texts are imagined to forge a connection with the Holocaust memory that otherwise remains inaccessible. She writes: “Personification represented for deconstructive critics the very fantasy about language that they were trying to deconstruct, the fantasy of referentiality and human presence . . . deconstructive critics imagined a text that was radically autonomous, even active” (5). Specifically, she continues, texts were imagined to provide “a site where one can locate the ethnic or racial identities we ordinarily describe as belonging to persons” (5). Consequently, Hungerford contends that the destruction of texts is often understood as being akin, if not equal, to the murder of their authors. Thus, rather than acknowledging the role of language in the mediation of
embodied experience, contemporary trauma narrative rhetoric aims to reduce the mediating quality of language by imagining texts themselves as possessing lived physical human existence.

Postwar literary representations of Holocaust memory, however, have not been alone in perpetuating fantasies of the seemingly unmediated transfer of historical trauma. American Holocaust museums, likewise, often aim to educate the public not only by presenting exhibits concerned with its “history,” but rather by presenting the past as “memory.” Interactive experiences are designed to foster an identification between visitors and Jewish victims, effectively minimizing the artifice of the museum experience in order to suggest a direct transfer of embodied experience. The head designer of the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. describes the museum experience as one in which spectators can share in the victims’ journey:

> We followed those people under all that pressure as they moved from their normal lives into ghettos, out of ghettos onto trains, from trains to camps, within the pathways of the camps, until finally to the end . . . . If visitors could take that same journey, they would understand the story because they will have experienced the story. (qtd. in Alexander 63)

The museum design thus implies that we can understand history intuitively by experiencing it, thereby fostering a more authentic connection to that past than any other representation.

Yet, while history-as-memory certainly provides powerful emotional experiences, these do not always work to illustrate a particular history. Gary Weissman has recently argued that the “deep-felt desire” of non-witnesses to “really feel the horror of the camps” (27) reveals the impossibility of such an enterprise. Though museums are designed to create an embodied and contextualized experience, this is a promise on which they can never fully deliver. Such experiences, in other words, cannot be transmitted outside of language and narrative, regardless of how authentically they have been recreated. Several problems arise from the notion that texts or narratives can stand in for embodied traumatic experience. Specifically, the fantasy that texts
or narratives are akin to embodied experience raises questions about the legitimacy of legal claims for those who have not directly experienced the original trauma. While trauma theory was initially concerned with the trauma of Holocaust survivors, the trauma of their descendents or other nonwitnesses is much harder to define. Dominick LaCapra, for instance, has emphasized that it is important to distinguish “between victims, perpetrators, and bystanders” (79). While he stresses the importance of trauma, LaCapra admits that sympathetic identification with traumatic memory cannot be identical to being a victim of injury. LaCapra notes that the traumatic memory of nonwitnesses poses a particular difficulty to “working through” historical trauma, noting that any attempts to move past trauma in the present might encounter resistance “because of what might almost be termed a fidelity to trauma, a feeling that one must somehow keep faith with it” (22). As with Hungerford’s observation that the destruction of texts is seen as the murder of the person or people they personify, so LaCapra speaks of a “melancholic sentiment” to the traumatic memory by those who come after, so that “in working through the past in a manner that enables survival or a reengagement in life, one is betraying those who were overwhelmed and consumed by that traumatic past” (22). In its emphasis on holding on to traumatic memory, trauma theory thus tends to lose sight of the way the present can provide an opportunity not only for working through trauma but for moving beyond it.

Even more problematic, however, is the implied universality of traumatic memory when it is imagined as narrative identification. By becoming accessible to everyone, injury seems to belong to no one. Embodiment, however, situates persons in place and time. When embodied trauma becomes a universalized narrative, it is thus emptied of its political and legal content. Wendy Brown, in studying the museum experience, warns that the visitors’ invitation to identify with the victims tends to transform the underlying political questions into a set of moral ones.
Specifically, she suggests that the sympathy model of identity disavows victims’ minority status as situated in and generated by specific political, historical and political-economic circumstances. In reducing identity to victim status, these discourses also reduce widely divergent political identity formations to difference. In this way, various political struggles of minority groups are depoliticized and appear solvable by a simple acceptance of difference. The tolerance model, Brown continues, “eschews a political vocabulary and an analysis of inequality, domination, and colonialism in favor of an emphasis on personal attitude, prejudice, difference, hatred, and acceptance” (148). This dramatically oversimplifies political realities by suggesting that differences between disparate identity groups are ultimately resolvable through empathy.

While, at best traumatic identification generates a sense of continuing identity that binds victim communities across time, at worst, the belief in memory as universally available threatens to depoliticize the embodied reality of historical injury that is being remembered. Any framework for addressing historical injury in the present must be attentive to the way in which narrative coherence mediates embodied experience. While the trauma model of understanding historical injury is attuned to the embodied experience of historical trauma, it cannot transmit this experience to subsequent generations outside of the mediation of the language of narrative. Narrative, however, can never fully substitute embodied experience. Therefore, any reading practice attuned to historical injury must move away from the language of trauma as the primary mode of understanding embodied experience.

In recent years, scholars within affect studies have begun to develop a new set of conceptual tools for understanding how instances of collective memory can be transmitted outside of established identity claims. Ann Cvetkovich, for instance, has argued that particular queer “traumas” such as AIDS affect not only individuals, but manifest themselves as public
moods. These histories, she suggests “continue to haunt the present, and . . . take surprising forms, appearing in textures of everyday emotional life that don't necessarily seem traumatic and certainly don't fit the model of PTSD” (Cvetkovich 6). Scholars of affect have since explored the political potential of such feelings, and particularly of the negative feelings that have tended to be understood as stifling change rather than being politically productive; such affects include shame (Eve Sedgwick), depression (Ann Cvetkovich, José Muñoz), failure (Jack Halberstam), “ugly feelings” such as envy, anxiety, and irritation (Sianne Ngai), and painful feelings like nostalgia, regret, and loneliness (Heather Love). All of these approaches are intended to make invisible histories, particularly queer history, visible and readable outside of a trauma framework.

In adapting the trauma framework to become inclusive of those histories that have not been privileged, these scholars are also reconfiguring the trauma model in important ways. Less in the psychological effects of these traumas than in the “affective experiences” (3) that saturate public life, they move away from the traumatic as an extraordinary event that stands apart from everyday life. Feelings are understood, instead, to be a reaction to an ongoing process. Unlike traumatic memory, which resides primarily in the past, these affects carry political potential in the present.

Lauren Berlant’s concept of “systemic crisis” provides an even more productive starting point for conceiving of our experience of the present outside of the trauma model. “Crisis,” Berlant writes, unlike trauma, “is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming” (Berlant 10). While Berlant is specifically interested in crisis in order to describe the discrepancy between “social democratic promise” and neoliberal reality, I would suggest that this framework has
much potential for engaging with the problem of historical injury. This affective model allows for an understanding of “public feeling” that is distributive and responsive to the larger historical, political and social contexts to which it belongs. Berlant writes:

>affective atmospheres are shared, not solitary, and . . . bodies are continuously busy judging their environments and responding to the atmospheres in which they find themselves. . . . [W]hatever one argues about the subject as sovereign agent of history, affective responses may be said significantly to exemplify shared historical time.” (15)

As opposed to trauma theory, this attunement to “affective atmospheres” does not require narrative mediation in order to have the capacity to affect. Indeed, while trauma narratives require identification with the victims of trauma, affective experience is not a direct reaction to any one particular condition. Instead, Berlant argues that affect “registers the conditions of life that move across persons and worlds, play out in lived time, and energize attachments” in ways that “make a shared atmosphere something palpable” (16). Here, affective experience of “historical time” is understood to be distributive. In other words, while it affects individuals, it is not limited to individual psychology. Rather, affect here appears as a sensitivity to one’s environment.

The approach I have sketched out so far has focused specifically on reframing the present condition by understanding individual experience as affected by the moods of assemblages of a particular historical moment. As I will argue in the subsequent chapters, it is these moods of past injury that continue to resonate in the present as historical injury. Yet, I am also careful to emphasize that historical injury as distributive affect must necessarily be understood in its embodied context. Indeed, unlike Berlant, who is interested in elucidating the emergence of collective feelings such as “optimism” and “depression,” I would suggest that the resonance of
historical injury in the present is much less universal and depends largely on embodied experience. In other words, we must take care not to equate affect with feeling.

At this point, it is useful to turn to new work in phenomenology that has insisted on the significance of physical embodiment that influences our ability to apprehend. Sara Ahmed, for instance, has argued that the body in its physical “orientation” determines what can and cannot be seen. “Orientations,” she writes, “shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitance as well as ‘who’ or ‘what’ we direct our energy and attention toward” (3). Ahmed’s phenomenological approach recognizes that the body is not only the bearer of an experience that happens to the body, but rather that the body is integrated into a larger network of materialities which shape and modify experience. It is for this reason, as I will argue in chapter four, that historical injury in Coetzee’s *Disgrace* must be understood not as belonging to identity, but to embodiment.

It is my contention in this project that by accounting for the ways in which historical events are shaped by material conditions and affective relations, we can productively displace the trauma model’s problematic reliance on narrative identification. What would it mean, for instance, to think about historical injury not as a desire for collective memory of the past, but as demanding recognition in the present? Or to develop a justice framework that is attentive to the multiple complex social and historical relations of embodied experience? In the chapters that follow, I offer a series of correctives to the trauma model and suggest that an affective reading practice offers a more complex understanding of the ways in which historical injuries manifest themselves in the present.
1.3 Writing Wrongs

In this dissertation I draw on a body of works that has been published in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This moment, I argue, represents a critical shift in memory discourse, marked not only by the temporal remove from the postwar period but also by a critical reflection on the calcification of certain Holocaust narratives whose ‘lessons’ were increasingly being invoked in the context of global human rights violations. For many critics the comparison of Holocaust memory with rights violations elsewhere provides a useful lens for understanding contemporary politics. As Daniel Lévy and Natan Sznaider observe, the “homogenization of memory” (by which they mean the seeming universalization of the lessons of the Holocaust) did not lessen its uniqueness. Rather, they argue, a global understanding of Holocaust memory “provides a model for national self-critique, serves to promote human rights as a legitimating principle in the global community, and plainly offers a negative example of dealing with alterity” (Lévy and Sznaider 201). Thus, in their view, Holocaust memory has provided a useful model for organizing military interventions as, for instance, in the Balkan wars in the 1990s.

Similarly, Michael Rothberg has argued that Holocaust memory, in addition to informing contemporary politics, is also shaped by them in turn. Arguing for what he terms the “multidirectionality” of memory, Rothberg has suggested that memory must be understood “as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative” (3). Thus, he concludes, we must understand Holocaust memory not as being “in competition with the memory of slavery, colonialism, and racism” (7), but rather as “provid[ing] resources for the rethinking of justice” (21). In this model, multidirectionality is understood as accommodating revisions to the official narrative, recognizing and accounting for Fraser’s demand for recognition and representation. While Rothberg offers a productive model for
thinking about the way in which narratives of historical memory modify each other, he
nevertheless relies on an understanding of injury as a signifier that can stand in for a range of
events and experiences. What is missing from Rothberg’s account, and, I would argue, from
much recent work on human rights discourse, is an account of the embodied experience of
injury.

Indeed, Joseph Slaughter has argued that the legitimating fictions of contemporary human
rights law depend on an abstract and ultimately disembodied notion of the human. Slaughter
observes the way in which “human rights aspires to convince the individual to regard its
projected legal image as real rather than artificial,” so that the “legal image of the person might
come to be seen as coextensive with the actual human being (22). The version of human rights
that Slaughter describes, I would argue, depends on the same reduction of embodied experience
to narrative fiction as the trauma model. While for trauma, narrative is imagined as coextensive
with embodied experience—and thus retains its usefulness across time—this version of human
rights imagines the law’s universal validity as similarly transcending national, cultural and racial
differences. Conceived as narrative or fictional body first and physical body second, however,
such models fail to address the complexities of injury as embodied experience. Disregarding
identity differences (race, gender, class etc.) as well as differences within ostensibly singular
categories of identity, it assumes an ultimately narrow definition of the human. This challenge to
standard narratives about the human is reflected in the texts I discuss. How, for instance, might
we read Coetzee’s use of the term “Lösung” (142) (connoting Endlösung [final solution]) in
reference to the euthanasia of dogs? Disgrace challenges existing justice frameworks and
considers the way in which our definition of injury extends not only beyond time and place but
asks how we might begin to account for injury suffered by non-human animals.
In her recent book *Fictions of Dignity*, Elizabeth Anker has compellingly argued against Slaughter’s claim that literary fiction abstracts personhood in the same way as human rights discourse. Proposing an “embodied politics of reading,” Anker shows how “aesthetic experience,” rather than simply replicating the problem of the disembodied political subject, can dynamically “map the unfolding of an embodied consciousness” (Anker 74) in ways that endow it with political agency. Building on Anker’s critique of the abstract notion of the “human” that underlies Slaughter’s concept of human rights, my project emphasizes the importance of embodiment in locating injury—including human rights abuse—in a historically situated context.

Specifically, I am concerned with the way in which temporality affects the framing of ‘injury.’ In his important book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), Rob Nixon has argued that we must understand violence as a force whose effects are felt not only across national borders but also across time. Indeed, Nixon suggests that environmental crises, whose effects typically remain invisible for many years, challenge traditional notions of violence and injury. Nixon terms this temporality “slow violence,” explaining:

> By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or an action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales. (2)

In order to address the injuries resulting from slow violence, it is no longer possible to simply rely on a framework of comparative justice. Because it unfolds over time, slow violence challenges traditional notions of victims and perpetrators as these categories become obscured over time. Additionally, by focusing on the effects of environmental crises, slow violence emphasizes the materiality of embodied experience and the embeddedness of the physical body.
in the larger material networks to which it belongs. While Nixon’s work is specifically concerned with environmental justice, he opens up important questions about the temporality and materiality of injury.

In the chapters that follow, I argue that the novels under consideration encourage new ways of conceptualizing historical injury beyond the trauma model. My second chapter examines the limitations of cultural narratives of historical injury as they relate to American imaginings of the Holocaust. Here, I argue that Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* (2004) highlights the shortcomings of conventional understandings of the Holocaust that tend to privilege narrative identifications with traumatic experience. Though seeming to offer an affective relationship to the past, such identifications obscure rather than clarify the contours of historical injury. Combining the conventions of autobiography with the speculative imaginings of a counterfactual history, the novel both encourages and undermines “authentic” knowledge of the Holocaust. In this way, it provides an alternative approach to historical injury that moves beyond the stable narratives of identification and victimhood.

While *The Plot Against America* examines the pitfalls of conventional trauma narratives, in Chapter Three I turn to the way that a dynamic affective relation with the past can productively engage historical injury in the present. Reading W.G. Sebald’s novel *Austerlitz*, I argue that the postwar generation’s increasing temporal distance from the Holocaust need not be, as some scholars have argued, a lamentable lack of access to this past. Instead, I argue that Sebald proposes a new affective temporal framework that demonstrates how the present is dynamically shaped by a material past. Releasing physical artifacts and architectural spaces from the burden of memorialization, he allows them instead to function as objects whose “vital materiality” inaugurates an affective encounter with the past. Taking seriously the affective
engagement with such objects, engagements which attest to the past without overdetermining it, I contend that new materialist methodologies enable us to move past static models of historical memory and politicized forgetting.

The fourth chapter examines the way in which affect offers a framework for understanding historical injury in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. While much of the critical response *Disgrace*’s engagement with social justice has responded to the way that identity and individual experience are shaped by race, gender, and sexual orientation, few have remarked upon the temporality of injury.By contrasting the past disenfranchisement of colonial and apartheid politics with contemporary sexual violence against women, *Disgrace* thematizes the difficulty of reconciling conflicting concepts of injury and victimization. Here identity categories not only compound and modify each other laterally in the present, but also, importantly, across generational divides. Expanding on recent critiques of intersectionality and exciting new work in the phenomenology of affect, this chapter suggests that Coetzee’s approach to the question of historical injury reveals the way in which temporality modifies and undermines the role of identity claims in contemporary frameworks of justice.

While my project suggests a comparative or “multidirectional” reading by moving from Holocaust memory in the first two chapters to a discussion of historical injury in the context of South African apartheid, I want to be careful to distinguish my approach from that of Lévi and Rothberg. Rather than extending our understanding of Holocaust memory to that of other instances of global injury, I want to challenge the notion that embodied injuries are comparable in the first place. It is only by paying attention to the specific ways in which historical injury manifests in the present, that we can address its complex and multifaceted connections. Finally, I want to make clear that in advocating for an affective reading practice, I
do not intend to replace either historiography or, for that matter, trauma discourse. In fact, as I will argue in my reading of *Austerlitz*, any meaningful understanding of the narrator’s affective experience of historical injury at Breendonk does not exist independent of other articulations of that injury. Rather, his experience is informed by both historical and biographical narratives about the past and exists alongside their narratives. At the same time, however, an affective reading practice challenges the dominance of these discourses which, in their very articulation of the past as narratives, tend to reduce precisely the complexities of lived embodied experience that first constitute their significance as injury. I want to provide a corrective to the binary that requires that we either commit to traumatic memory or abandon any obligation to the past. By providing a theoretical framework for understanding how past injury resonates in the present, one that privileges the materiality of embodiment, I believe we can better attend to what it means to be accountable to the past.
Notes

1 Marianne Hirsch originally used the term “second generation” to describe specifically the experience of children of Jewish survivors. She has since expanded the meaning of the term to include non-Jews born at the end of the war: “I believe it may be usefully describe other second-generation memories of cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences” (22).

2 Sociologists Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora have first developed the notion of “collective memory” (mémoire collective), which stresses the continuation and cohesion of cultural belonging across time. While Halbwachs and Nora emphasized national identity, recent critics have begun to move away from this model to respond to the complexity of cultural memory.

3 Drawing on Art Spiegelman’s 1972 “The First Maus,” Hirsch argues, the author can imagine his father’s experience in Auschwitz “only by way of a widely available photograph by Margaret Bourke-White of liberated prisoners in Buchenwald” (Hirsch 112).

4 As Hilene Flanzbaum argues, “our knowledge of the Holocaust in America has rarely been delivered by direct witness; it comes to us by way of representations, and representations of representations, through editors and publishers, producers and directors” (4).

5 Amy Hungerford observes that “the conflation of texts and persons impoverishes our ideas not only of art… but also of person, since it renders the fact of embodiment irrelevant, when embodiment is exactly what situates us in history and makes us vulnerable to oppression” (21).

6 Berlant uses this notion as based on Raymond Williams’ notion of a “structure of feeling” (see Berlant 15).

7 In this way, this project responds to recent articulations of the posthuman and debates surrounding animal rights. In recent work by Donna Haraway and Cary Wolfe, and beginning with Derrida, there is a move towards the materiality of embodiment that does not prioritize the human as a category as well as an engagement with how animals’ suffering might be addressed by the law. Coetzee, too, takes up this question more explicitly in Elizabeth Costello.
2. “THOSE TWO YEARS”: ALTERNATE HISTORY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN PHILIP ROTH’S THE PLOT AGAINST AMERICA

2.1 Introduction

Philip Roth’s novel The Plot Against America received mixed reviews when it was first published in 2004. As a counterfactual history, a genre that is associated most often with popular writing rather than literary merit, the novel was seen by many as less serious than Roth’s other work.\(^1\) Set in the 1940s, the novel imagines a fascist takeover of the United States in which rather than seeing President Roosevelt confirmed for a third term in office, Charles Lindbergh is elected the 33rd President of the United States. Lindbergh, whose anti-Semitic views and Nazi sympathies were widely known, negotiates a non-aggression pact with Hitler, causing many Jewish Americans, among them the writer’s own fictionalized family, to fear the implementation of anti-Semitic Nazi policies. Though the goals of the Lindbergh administration in regards to the Jewish population in the United States are never entirely revealed, demonstrations that escalate to anti-Semitic riots across the country result in a state of fear that eventually affects Roth’s alter-ego Philip and his family in 1942. However, as swiftly as Lindbergh’s presidency begins, it comes to an end when Lindbergh, setting off in his own plane, simply vanishes. It is at this point, in 1942, that Roosevelt resumes his presidency and Roth’s novel concludes by setting history back on its familiar course.

For many early reviewers, The Plot Against America serves as a critical reflection on contemporary US politics: “In portraying the United States becoming a fascist-like state under the administration of an ill-qualified, naïve, and incompetent president,” Gavriel Rosenfeld argues, for instance, “Roth offers a not-so-thinly veiled critique of the United States under the administration of President George W. Bush” (Rosenfeld 155-156). In an essay on the writing of
the novel, Philip Roth himself has denied that the novel was intended as a *roman à clef*. However, Roth’s characterization of George Bush in the same essay as “a man unfit to run a hardware store let alone a nation like this one” has confirmed the legitimacy of this reading for many critics. Roth himself has insisted that rather than an allegory of the Bush presidency, *The Plot* is, in fact, an engagement with the years 1940–42: “I am not pretending to be interested in those two years—I am interested in those two years” (Roth “Story” 10). Taking seriously Roth’s claims about the centrality of “those two years,” another group of critics has focused their analyses on the possibility of a fascist takeover in the United States in the 1940s. For many of these critics, Roth’s novel shows “just how easily we too can lose our liberties” (Jacobi 99), and serves as a warning that the United States, too, has had the potential to be complicit in an “American Holocaust” (99). Against these readings, I will argue that it is not the possibility of an American Holocaust, but precisely the presentist assumption about such a possibility that Roth explores in *The Plot*.

Despite their obvious differences, both camps focus on Roth’s novel as an alternate history that, by asking “what if,” inquires into the workings of history. Although alternate history’s counterfactuality has been dismissed in the past as unable to offer any valuable insight, Gavriel Rosenfeld states that in recent years postmodernism’s “playfully ironic relationship to history” (7) has contributed to elevating the genre as a subject worthy of serious consideration. In fact, historian Niall Ferguson has suggested that counterfactual history, as long as it is drawn from the realm of the possible, can contribute to a serious engagement with the past. Only by asking “what if,” Ferguson notes, can we begin “to say anything about causation in the past without invoking covering laws” (81). The turn to the counterfactual then becomes useful, “if only to test our causal hypotheses” (81). Alternate history invites speculation about the cause and
effect relationship of historical events by imagining what might bring about an alternate timeline. In these narratives, the past is revisited in order to mark what Karen Hellekson has termed a “nexus event,” a moment in time, an action or a detail that brings about the splitting off of the fictional from the historical past. Thus, the nexus event inaugurates a timeline that is often significantly different from the sequence of events with which we are familiar, showing, Hellekson states, that “worlds radically other” can result “from an extremely minor or forgotten event that snowballed” (5).

In the case of *The Plot Against America*, the election of Charles Lindbergh is all that stands between United States liberalism and not only mere acceptance of Nazi ideology, but American fascism itself. In fact, for many critics, *The Plot Against America* demonstrates specifically the precarious nature of American liberal values. As a counter-factual exploration of fascism in the United States, *The Plot Against America* is often compared to Sinclair Lewis’ 1935 novel *It Can’t Happen Here* with which it shares many similarities. Like Roth’s novel, Lewis imagines a fascist takeover of the United States government—not, in this case by Charles Lindbergh, but by Huey Long. The election quickly results in a harsh authoritarian rule which outlaws dissent and echoes Nazi rule on many levels. Because of these similarities, for many critics the two novels belong to the same tradition of novels that paint “phantasmagoric pictures of a United States whose every promise has been turned upside down,” and of which *It Can’t Happen Here* is a foremost example.

What is significant about this tradition of alternate histories which thematize American fascism is that they not only function as an exploration of how easily American liberal values can become compromised, but more or less explicitly serve as a warning to readers to prevent such an outcome. For Martin Jacobi, these alternate histories perform an important public service:
“[i]t is good that we have these novels, and good that Roth’s novel has helped to bring these warnings into clearer focus. It would be good as well if we attend to their admonitions and exhortations” (99). While such a reading emphasizes the importance of future action, it simultaneously reveals its own presentist standpoint. After all, a warning about the threats of an alternate history implies that the past as it really was is to be celebrated.

Reading The Plot in the same tradition as Sinclair Lewis’ alternate history, I would argue, is therefore problematic. While it shares many similarities, The Plot does not fit Lewis’s model of “what if” narrative. In Lewis’ dystopian novel, the nexus event, while set in the past, inaugurates an alternate present and near future. By contrast, Roth’s novel is set entirely in the past, reconnecting its alternate history with the timeline of recorded history in 1942. In other words, Roth’s novel effectively possesses two nexus events, one in 1940 with the election of Lindbergh and the other in 1942 as Lindbergh’s presidency ends with his disappearance. In this reconnection of the fictional with the real historical timeline, I would argue, The Plot loses effectiveness as political warning. While for Lewis, the nexus event sets his history on a course that has not yet been written and that could still become realized in the future, for Roth’s novel, this potential remains foreclosed.

Many critics have lamented the novel’s lack of political force precisely because of this narrative construction. Lindbergh’s sudden and mysterious disappearance by the end of the novel—the event which reinstates Roosevelt’s presidency and thus allows history to resume its known course—appears to many as a convenient deus ex machina that allows for the plot’s resolution but which evades a more thorough critique. For instance, Timothy Parrish has described the ending as too “optimistic,” criticizing that rather than develop the political questions at stake, Roth simply “backs away from his book's implications” (98-99). Lindbergh’s
disappearance resolves the conflicts without any intervention. While the warning for readers to “attend” to the novel’s “admonitions” makes sense in the context of *It Can’t Happen Here*, in *The Plot* any intervention on the part of Americans to prevent or reclaim American liberal values appears to be redundant as the novel, regardless of any intervention, reconnects with the real historical timeline. Because Roth limits the novel to providing an alternate account of only two years in 1940s America, it forecloses an uncertain ending, along with it a true alternate reality, from the outset. Roth’s emphasis is ultimately not on the possibility of a fascist takeover, but rather on the nonoccurrence of these events—the fact that, while it *can* happen here, it ultimately did not. In discussing his novel, Roth has stressed this point:

> I can only repeat that in the 30's there were many of the seeds for its happening here, but it didn't. And the Jews here became what they became because it didn't. All the things that tormented them in Europe never approached European proportions here. Nor is my point that this can happen and will happen; rather, it's that at the moment when it should have happened, it did not happen.” (“Story” 10)

It appears that we must read Roth’s novel not as a speculative fiction about an alternate reality whose events might have an effect on our nonfictional future, nor as an allegory of a nexus event in our own recent past that will have such an effect. Instead, Roth suspends the question of the “what if” by drawing attention to the cause and effect relationships on which such narratives depend. Because the novel’s structure forecloses the possibility that Roth’s alternate history might result in any outcome other than the familiar history of 1942, the events described in the novel cannot have any perceptible effect on the outcome of history. In this way, *The Plot* functions as the opposite of Hellekson’s description of alternate history: rather than a small or forgotten event bringing about an entirely different world, a major event (Lindbergh’s presidency) does not appear to change a thing. The novel’s interest in the two years in the 1940s must, then, be understood not as a serious engagement with the political developments of the
past but rather as a present reflection on the absence of such events. If it is possible, the novel asks, to substitute the absence of an American Holocaust in 1940-42 with a fictive account of its presence without it having any tangible effect on our contemporary present, then what does this mean about the way that we understand the causal relationships of history? Roth’s novel, I argue, challenges the notion that history is reducible to one definitive chain of cause and effect, suggesting instead that the selection of relevant causal connections is itself shaped by contemporary attitudes toward that history. More specifically, I suggest that The Plot serves as a reflection on the way that contemporary American memory production about the Holocaust past has been disproportionately shaped by the values of American liberalism.

2.2 Plotting Histories

Despite Roth’s own insistence that “it did not happen” here, there has been a growing list of scholarship published in the last few years that suggests that we ought to take seriously the lessons and warnings the novel appears to contain. Even scholars who have critiqued the value of reading The Plot as an American Holocaust narrative often do not question the novel’s classification as Holocaust literature. For instance, for Walter Benn Michaels it is not the novel’s status as a trauma narrative that is under dispute, but rather its subject. He argues that the novel’s concerns about the dangers of American anti-Semitism are somewhat misguided as they aim at evoking sympathy for events that have never occurred. “Why,” he asks, “should we be outraged by what didn’t happen rather than outraged by what did [i.e. US slavery]?” (289). Thus, for Michaels, while the novel’s counterfactualty lessens the novel’s impact as Holocaust narrative, it does not seriously compromise its aims as such.
Still, for many critics *The Plot* presents a compelling argument for evaluating the political and ethical questions raised in the novel for our own time. T. Austin Graham, for instance, argues that the novel provides guidelines for how to “understand, anticipate, and prevent atrocity” (145-146). While for Michaels, alternate history limits the argument’s force, for Graham the novel’s message succeeds precisely because of the novel’s counterfactual. By “telling a story that never happened and whose ending could be anyone’s guess,” Graham writes, Roth “eliminat[es] foreknowledge almost entirely” (126). Thus, like the characters, the reader, too, is unable to determine Lindbergh’s true motivations. As a consequence, the reader can experience, along with the novel’s characters, the uncertainty of their future under the new regime. Graham argues that this leaves open to speculation any appropriate course of action: “the terrified warnings of American Jews, and the uncertain vacillations of characters in the middle most disagree with one another, [yet] they all can seem logically grounded and even reasonable” (126). The inability to “make entirely confident judgments about people and institutions as the story unfolds,” approximates for Graham an authentic experience, “just . . . as it must have been for Europeans caught up in an historical moment whose conclusion was not yet known” (Graham 126). Underlying Graham’s reading is the assumption that, in order to begin to make sense of an event as difficult as the Holocaust, and to portray with some “accuracy” the experience of living as a Jew under an anti-Semitic fascist regime, one needs to be able to imagine how these experiences “must have been” by putting oneself in the shoes of those who experienced these events as unfolding in the present. Thus, for Graham, alternate history lends the novel what might be described as autobiographical authenticity.

The notion that fictional narrative can function as a way to convey a sense of historical accuracy has been widely studied among scholars of Holocaust memory. For instance, S. Lilian
Kremer describes the process through which nonwitnesses of the Holocaust use fictional accounts in order to identify with its victims as bearing “witness through the imagination.” This form of vicarious witnessing, for Kremer, ‘makes real’ those experiences in a way that allows Jews who have not experienced the European events themselves to connect with this part of the Jewish past. Particularly in the United States, which has few direct witnesses of the Holocaust, Hilene Flanzbaum has noted, Holocaust memory has often meant an engagement with narrative representations. The value of these forms of vicarious witnessing has been widely debated. Because the transfer of actual lived experience is impossible, such narratives, Marianne Hirsch has argued, rely in large part on the mediation of public images and narratives. As an example, she draws on Art Spiegelman’s 1972 “The First Maus,” in which the author can imagine his father’s experience in Auschwitz “only by way of a widely available photograph by Margaret Bourke-White of liberated prisoners in Buchenwald” (Hirsch 112). The persistence of public images that exert an important influence on the way that these events are understood also affects the reading of The Plot, and it is their powerful influence that Roth critiques.

Gary Weissman has argued that the focus on identification with victim narratives has been emblematic of the American approach to the Holocaust. Because Americans are “not haunted by the traumatic impact of the Holocaust, but by its absence,” he argues, witnessing through imagination becomes a way of “endeavoring to actually feel the horror of what otherwise eludes us” (23). Rather than merely aiding an understanding of the Holocaust, then, Weissman suggests, affective identification with its victims allows nonwitnesses to claim their “own place in the hierarchy of suffering” (21). Thus, in the United States, the affective relationship of nonwitnesses to trauma narratives, while on the one hand providing access to knowledge of the Holocaust that escapes rational understanding, represents simultaneously a
problematic reduction of its complexities. As Weissman observes, “[a] feeling for horror neither requires nor guarantees much in the way of historical and moral comprehension of the Holocaust” (210). I would argue that it is the problematic notion of vicarious witnessing that Roth examines and critiques in *The Plot Against America*.

The attempt to understand the Holocaust through narrative identification is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in *The Diary of Anne Frank*, Anne’s autobiographical account of her experience of living under the threat of Nazi persecution, to which *The Plot Against America* bears many striking similarities. This resemblance is not a coincidence. In fact, *The Plot Against America* in many ways reads like an American rewriting of the famous Holocaust narrative. Like the *Diary*, Roth’s novel is narrated from a child’s perspective—Anne Frank is thirteen when she begins writing her diary and Philip is nine at the time the novel opens. Both texts span the course of two years during Nazi rule: 1942-44 and 1940-42, respectively. Most importantly, however, Roth’s narrative, written from the perspective of his own 9-year old alter-ego, appears to aspire to the same autobiographical authenticity that makes Anne Frank’s *Diary* so compelling. Both narrators chronicle the events of the two years as they experience it, without foreknowledge of how events will unfold. While Philip’s narration does not immediately offer the same level of authenticity, Roth has emphasized the characters’ biographical credibility, explaining that writing the novel

> gave me an opportunity to bring my parents back from the grave and restore them to what they were at the height of their powers in their late 30’s . . . and then to go ahead to imagine how they might have conducted themselves under the enormous pressure of a Jewish crisis . . . I’ve tried to portray them here as faithfully as I could—as though I were, in fact, writing nonfiction. (10)

For Graham, this, of course, is what makes *The Plot* so successful, as it enables the novel to function like autobiography. It is important to note, however, that despite Roth’s effectively
The Novel's Title, *The Plot Against America*, Self-Consciously Points to the Structuring Forces that Underlie the Narrativization of Lives and Events, and I Would Argue That We Need to Take Seriously the Various Meanings of “Plot” with Which Roth Critically Engages. The Title’s “Plot” Most Immediately Brings to Mind the Lindbergh Administration’s Secret Aims, Which Comprise the Novel’s Narrative Arc and Whose Ultimate Unknowability as Conspiracy Evokes Another More Threatening Meaning of Plot. While Narrative Plot Implies a Resolution and Ultimately a Framework Through Which to Interpret the Novel’s Events, the Purpose of Plot as Conspiracy Hints...
precisely at the concealment of meaning. Like the novel’s genre that treads the line between autobiography (as fact) and alternate history (as fiction), so the two meanings of plot appear to be diametrically opposed and yet inextricably linked. While seeming to offer an interpretation, plot simultaneously forecloses ultimate certainty about these events. If plot-as-conspiracy conceals meaning that exists, the novel suggests, it is possible that plot-as-narrative structure leads the reader to a state of interpretive paranoia.⁸

In narrative, Hayden White has argued, plot offers coherence to events in such a way that it makes apparent the causal and temporal connections that give them meaning. As it unfolds, plot, by its end, appears to “[reveal] . . . a structure that was immanent in the events all along” (23). However, he states, the naturalness of plot’s coherence depends on its own narrative boundedness. It is only because narrative is constructed that it can culminate in the narrative coherence that a plot provides. It is for this reason, White warns, that we cannot speak of historical discourse as possessing the same kind of immanence. Rather, what appears as underlying structure in actual events, must be understood as made to fit narrative coherence.⁹

White writes, “[t]he reality of these events does not consist in the fact that they occurred but that, first of all, they were remembered and, second, that they are capable of finding a place in a chronologically ordered sequence” (23). In other words, underlying the writing of history is a selection process that endows events with meanings; events do not speak for themselves.

Importantly, in a novel like The Plot Against America, which thematizes the unfolding of historical events that seem to bring about a fascist United States, the lines that distinguish between the structures underlying fictional narrative (i.e. plot) and those that govern historical developments (i.e. conspiracy) appear almost indistinguishable. At several points, the novel suggests that the structures of history, like those of plot, can only reveal themselves in retrospect.
In one such moment, Philip, reflecting on the uncertainty of the present of unfolding events, muses:

[A]s Lindbergh’s election couldn’t have made clearer to me, the unfolding of the unforeseen was everything. Turned wrong way round, the relentless unforeseen was what we schoolchildren studied as ‘History,’ harmless history, where everything unexpected in its own time is chronicled on the page as inevitable. The terror of the unforeseen is what the science of history hides, turning a disaster into an epic. (113-114)

While temporal distance from the events is often accompanied with a new perspective, White argues, we must be careful to account for constructions that reduce the complexity of real events to a coherent narrative. He writes, “[i]nsofar as historical stories can be completed, can be given narrative closure, can be shown to have had a plot all along, they give to reality the odor of the ideal. This is why the plot of a historical narrative is always an embarrassment and has to be presented as ‘found’ in the events rather than put there by narrative techniques” (24). Moreover, White argues that in historical accounts that draw on “‘real’ or ‘lived’ stories” there is a sense that these “have only to be uncovered or extracted from the evidence and displayed before the reader to have their truth recognized immediately and intuitively” (qtd. in Friedländer 39). Thus, for White, historical representation often does not account for its own assumptions about its use of narrative which consequently makes it difficult to challenge the universality of historical narrative. For Roth, likewise, historical narratives are inevitably shaped by the present context out of which they emerge and must be understood within those frameworks.

2.3 **Beyond Trauma**

Although trauma narratives today appear to occupy a central role in understanding the Holocaust, it is important to note that the focus on the victims was not initially central. Instead, I argue, the emphasis on understanding the Holocaust through trauma narrative suggests, in its
own right, a selective reading practice that reveals its own presentist concerns. In the immediate postwar years, the existence of the camps, rather than raising ethical questions about the survivors, played an important role in the political positioning of the United States during the Cold War. The postwar period, Thomas Schaub has argued, is marked by an attempt to define a new political direction for the country. Reflecting on the 1930s and 40s, contemporary historians argued that both communism and fascism had relied too much on “’facile’ ideas of progress and ‘history,’” and that the American response had “wavered in its rejection of totalitarian politics” (7). The “new liberalism” was supposed to draw on the lessons in “innocence and naiveté” (10) learned in its recent past. Importantly, this new liberal rhetoric, Schaub notes, framed communism and fascism in similar anti-totalitarian terms.\textsuperscript{10} Thus, while anti-communist rhetoric was prevalent, the implicit conflation of totalitarian regimes allowed each to inform the other. It is for this reason that the camps took on a political significance in the context of the Cold War. If the camps were representative of the brutality that German totalitarianism was capable of, then in the postwar period, they presented that against which the United States would define itself—namely totalitarianism itself. The political positioning against the camps then functioned, by extension, also as a response to communist totalitarianism. Though written before the war in 1935, Sinclair Lewis’ \textit{It Can’t Happen Here} is important insofar as it, too, emphasizes, in imagining an American fascist takeover, political consequences rather than ethical concerns.

It is in this context then that we must understand the cultural shift that began increasingly to widen the acceptance of Jews in the United States. In fact, the 1950s, Jeffrey Alexander argues, marked the “first time [that] overtly positive representations of Jewish people proliferated in popular and high culture alike. It was during this period that the phrase ‘Judeo-Christian tradition’ was born” (14). This new widespread tolerance of American Jews, Alexander
continues, did not itself present a “suddenly felt affection for, or identification with, those whom they had vilified for countless centuries as the killers of Christ,” but rather adhered to the “laws of symbolic antinomy” (14): precisely because Jews were the main victims of Hitler’s totalitarianism, their protection represented a powerful symbol of anti-totalitarianism. Thus, the acceptance of American Jews takes on an important significance in the context of the Cold War consistent with the ideas of the new liberalism. Moreover, Alexander argues, the tolerance of Jews within the United States simultaneously signified a more hopeful perspective of the future, one which the United States would be instrumental in ushering in. In what he terms “progressive narrative,” the United States as liberators would rid Europe of fascism and by doing so would provide a context in which “the mass murders … would be redeemed” (17). The representation of the camps and their Jewish victims during the 1950s, then, helped to define the political position of the United States in the Cold War. As such, it is important to note that the increasing acceptance of American Jews did not speak so much to the recognition of the importance of laws protecting minorities. Rather, the tolerance of Jews was much more limited and tied to national Cold War identity.11

The extent to which American Jews were aligned with a rhetoric of US nationalism becomes clear in the popular representation of American Jewish Holocaust survivors during the 1950s. In a 1953 episode of the NBC show This Is Your Life, the host, Ralph Edwards, “surprises” Jewish Holocaust survivor Hanna Bloch Kohner by having her life story narrated to a national audience. In the typical This Is Your Life fashion, she is then reunited with a friend who was with her in two different concentration camps. Both of them are then asked—with what seems now an inappropriate and perhaps even disrespectful sensationalism—to describe their experiences in the camps in which both of them lost family members. After being reunited also
with her brother whom she had last seen when they were separated at one of the concentration camps, Edwards presents her with several gifts provided by the sponsor of the show. She then receives a charm bracelet in which each charm represents an “important event in [her] life.” And, as though this weren’t enough, Edwards emphasizes the role the United States has played in the show-typical optimistic ending of her story: “to you in your darkest hour, America held out a friendly hand, your gratitude is reflected in your unwavering devotion and loyalty to the land of your adoption.” What’s interesting about this episode is that it frames the status of Jews in America not only as citizens but as patriots. Moreover, it emphasizes the framework in which American nationalism somehow seems to appear as the answer to the evils of what we now call ‘the Holocaust’.

Even the *Diary of Anne Frank*, the most recognizable symbol of the Holocaust today, initially had a political function that allowed the United States to represent itself as a beacon of hope at the end of the war. Both the book, first published in the United States in 1952, and its Pulitzer Prize winning Broadway adaptation, which premiered in 1955, enjoyed an immense success. Significantly, however, American imports of the *Diary* were edited versions of Anne Frank’s book, tailored specifically to an American audience. This American ‘Anne Frank’ deemphasizes the tragedy of her own fate at Bergen-Belsen, while stressing her hope for the future. Tim Cole has noted that the Broadway play specifically “omits the few passages of horror and pessimism in the original diary, and ends with the ultimate in ‘feel-good’ endings. We walk away from the theatre with Anne’s last words, twice repeated, ringing in our ears: ‘In spite of everything. I still believe that people are really good at heart’” (34). Anne’s last words thus embody the optimism of the progressive narrative with its emphasis on redemption and the promise of a better American future.
Anne Frank’s message of hope and optimism could function as a powerful one because she was a victim of the Nazi regime. Yet, interestingly, the 1950s version is invested precisely in taking away the individual victimization to which her Jewish identity was crucial. After all, as Tim Cole argues, both the edited book and the play are careful to tell Anne’s story not as a Jewish war experience, but to reframe it as a more universal narrative that fostered identification with its non-Jewish American audience. Most references to Jewish identity were taken out, portraying Anne and her family as an assimilated Dutch family even as the reason for their hiding was dependent exclusively on their Jewishness. In his book, Cole points to one of the most blatant of the adaptation’s revisions:

The stage-play and movie-script downplayed Anne’s Jewishness [. . .]. In response to his despairing ‘Look at us, hiding out for two years! . . . Caught here, like rabbits in a trap, waiting for them to come and get us! And all for what? Because we’re Jews! . . .’, Anne—in her diary—responds that ‘we’re not the only Jews that’ve had to suffer. Right through the ages there have been Jews and they’ve had to suffer’. However, the Broadway Anne replies in far more universal terms: ‘We’re not the only people that’ve had to suffer. There’ve always been people that’ve had to . . . Sometimes one race . . . Sometimes another . . . and yet . . .’. (30)

The omission of her Jewishness and the avoidance of speaking of her death at the camps testifies to the privileging of a specifically American narrative of the Holocaust. Anne Frank’s status as a Jewish victim in these 1950s narratives is important only insofar as it endows her optimistic message with meaning. The threat the American ‘Anne Frank’ faces is not the Nazi persecution of Jews, but, more generally, the threat of living under a totalitarian regime. She represents not only a Jewish victim, but the new liberal American subject par excellence.

The reason that Anne Frank’s Diary could become a shaping force in the postwar years, then, not only speaks to the significance of her experience but must also be understood in the American context in which it could become representative of the postwar liberalist narrative.
Only because the *Diary* could be given a meaningful place in the narrative of the war years, it could achieve its emblematic status. This was a role not all Holocaust narratives could fulfill. The experience of camp survivors, by contrast, did not play a central role in American public life as American audiences were still not interested in hearing the stories of Jewish Holocaust survivors. After all, it wasn’t the survivors’ stories that had made the death camps so compelling in America, but rather it was their existence as a consequence of totalitarianism. It was only insofar as they provided a concrete marker of difference between the Nazi regime and the liberties of the United States, that the camps were central to the progressive narrative.

It was not until the 1970s, however, that the *Diary* became associated with the trauma of the Holocaust rather than with the optimism of U.S. liberalism. Most significant in this change was the beginning of the trial against Adolf Eichmann in 1961 which was covered extensively in the United States and which first brought the details of the camps to light. As Hannah Arendt has noted, even though the trial was supposed to address Eichmann and his crimes, much of it in fact centered around the Jewish survivors who were called to testify against Eichmann and the administration of the camps in general. The horrific details these witnesses recounted of the camps had never before had such a large public stage—their testimony was heard for the first time around the world. Importantly, the Eichmann trial was the first of the war trials that dealt so explicitly with the extermination of Jews, and it was the first one in which not the actions of the accused, but rather the experiences of the victims became central. And even though newspaper editorials emphasized the significance of the trial “as a warning against the constant threat of totalitarianism—that is Communism,” it had a profound impact on the Holocaust as moral concern. Significantly, the phrase appearing in the editorials “more than any other was ‘man’s inhumanity to man’” (Novick 134).
The trial shifted public attention from perpetrator to victim and brought about a more public association of the death camps with Jewish victimhood. Significantly, it was in the context of this trial that the term ‘Holocaust’ became identified with the extermination of Jews in the camps.17 This shift to an ethical rather than mostly political understanding of the Holocaust also resulted, once again, in a reshaping of the Anne Frank narrative. While the 1950s had sought to create a universal ‘Anne Frank,’ Cole writes, “[a]s the myth of the 'Holocaust' emerged during the 1960s, and particularly the 1970s and 1980s, there is a sense in which [she] was given back both her Jewishness and 'Holocaust' context. Rather than merely being a universal symbol, 'Anne Frank' became the symbol of the 'Holocaust' victim” (39).

Though Anne Frank’s status as specifically Jewish victim of the Holocaust was restored, Cole notes that she “remain[ed] a powerful universal symbol” (40). What is important to note, however, is that the narrative of Anne Frank was endowed, each time, with specifically American moral meaning. It is for this reason that the Diary cannot be read outside of the American context that produced it.18 The Diary came to occupy the role of quintessential Holocaust text precisely because it could become representative of the trauma of the Holocaust.

Philip Roth has long thematized the Diary’s status as an American Holocaust memory. In his 1978 novel The Ghost Writer, Roth problematizes the role of Anne Frank as representative of all Jewish identity after 1945 and the difficulty to resist such universalization. In The Ghost Writer, another of Philip Roth’s alter-egos, Nathan Zuckerman, encounters resistance from the Jewish community as well as his family in his portrayal of Jewish-American characters. Though, as he argues, these depictions are drawn from people he has encountered in his life, Nathan is criticized by his family for representing the Jewish community in a way that may incite anti-Semitic feelings. In response to Nathan’s short story, a judge and family friend asks
him: “Can you honestly say that there is anything in your short story that would not warm the heart of a Julius Streicher or a Joseph Goebbels?” (103-104). In the end, Nathan sees the only way out of his situation as requiring some other kind of legitimacy and imagines that a young woman he meets is in fact Anne Frank, who has survived the camps and now lives in America under an assumed name. In this counterfactual scenario, Nathan believes that if he could marry Anne Frank and present her to his family and his Jewish community as his wife, he would be absolved of all the suspicions against him: “To be wed somehow to you, I thought, my unassailable ally, my shield against their charges of defection and betrayal and reckless, heinous informing! Oh, marry me, Anne Frank, exonerate me before my outraged elders of this idiotic indictment!” (170). After all, he assumes that no one would “dar[e] to accuse of such unthinking crimes the husband of Anne Frank!” (171). Nathan’s imagination of course functions as a satirical comment about the impossibility of speaking about Jews in any other way than in the accepted narrative, which is embodied here by *The Diary of Anne Frank*. It is the universalized symbol of Anne Frank, and the moral imperatives that she emblematizes, that Roth challenges in *The Ghost Writer* and whose constructedness as national and moral narrative he examines in *The Plot Against America*.

2.4 “No Childhood Is Without Its Terrors”

In his review of *The Plot Against America*, J.M. Coetzee has speculated about the status of the novel as a trauma narrative, given that the events described never took place. He writes:

If those years had really occurred, the historical Philip Roth’s elder brother—who is just as real as Philip, and lived through the same history—would bear the marks too. But there were no Lindbergh years, and therefore there are no Lindbergh marks as such. What then is the nature of the scar that both brothers, the writer and the non-writer, bear, as a result of a history that is poetically (in Aristotle’s
sense) called the Lindbergh presidency; or is it only the writer brother who bears the scar; or is there in fact no scar at all? (Coetzee, “What Philip Knew”)

Coetzee concludes that “[t]he only answer that seems to make sense of the Lindbergh scar is that the scar is Jewishness itself, but Jewishness as an outsider’s idea” which “turns [Philip] from a Jewish American into an American Jew, or in the eyes of his enemies just a Jew in America . . . . That is what Philip cannot forget” (Coetzee). In fact, it is Jewish identity as an “outsider’s idea” that seems to be at stake here. More specifically, it is identity as connected to, or synonymous with, historical narrative that Roth seems to problematize in the novel. In writing a counterfactual trauma narrative, Roth makes apparent the problematic logic that underlies the genre of the trauma narrative as a way of making sense of the Holocaust and its history. Because the moral meaning of trauma narrative is already implied in the status of the Holocaust in American culture, the resultant reading of such narratives functions along a precise selection of events by which to explain and justify its moral meaning. What is being left out of such a reading, Roth seems to say, is precisely a critical understanding of this selection process which regularly prioritizes narrative coherence over an analysis of cause and effect.

Roth establishes from the very beginning a reading that encourages the connection between Jewish identity and a narrative of trauma. Philip begins his narrative: “Fear presides over these memories, a perpetual fear. Of course no childhood is without its terrors, yet I wonder if I would have been a less frightened boy if Lindbergh hadn’t been president or if I hadn’t been the offspring of Jews” (1). While the opening establishes the novel as a trauma narrative whose origin will be narrated in the novel, it simultaneously challenges the traditional trauma narrative by suggesting that causal relationships are not always apparent. In other words, while Philip’s fear appears explainable as stemming from being “the offspring of Jews,” his own tone of
speculation in the admission that “no childhood is without its terrors” suggests that cause and effect may not always be as apparent as they seem. The fear that colors Philip’s perception of these events is often informed at least as much by the fact of growing up as it is by the political developments in those years. The novel thus thematizes the relationship between the factual account of history and narrative that relies on the personal experience of those events, suggesting that the two ultimately do not correspond as closely as might be assumed. For example, Philip notes that Lindbergh’s nomination as presidential candidate and the fear it inspires, makes Newark’s Jewish community forget about the progress of the recent years. Philip states:

The sheer surprise of the Lindbergh nomination had activated an atavistic sense of being undefended that had more to do with Kishinev and the pogroms of 1903 than with New Jersey thirty-seven years later, and as a consequence, they had forgotten about Roosevelt’s appointment to the Supreme Court of Felix Frankfurter. . . all three of whom, like the president, were known to be friends of the Jews.” (18)

The word ‘atavistic’ here emphasizes the notion of selective memory as it points to the disruption of chronological time. Atavism, as the sudden return to a previous time, defies normal causal and temporal relationships and its very possibility exposes the constructivist nature of narrative chronology. Whether the community’s fears are justified or not, they believe that anti-Semitism will manifest in the same way that it has in Europe. The fear of anti-Semitism here seems to be not so much grounded in the events as it depends on the moralistic turn, the “atavistic sense of being undefended,” that conflates Jewish identity (including American Jewish identity) with victimization regardless of its social and historical circumstances. The effect is that causal and temporal relationships seem effectively reversed in a way in which identity—and the narrative of injury to which it is connected—precedes the actual events as they develop.

In The Plot, Roth seems to simultaneously invoke and reject this atavistic model that privileges the notion of inevitable victimhood as the novel continually and self-consciously
connects its own events to the timeline of the European Holocaust. Its close ties to the events in Europe allows contemporary readers whose knowledge about the events of World War II and the Holocaust is informed by the cultural narrative that has developed since the 1970s to read for a familiar plot. While Graham is right to say that we cannot know the Lindbergh administration’s intentions for its Jewish population, for contemporary readers, *The Plot* cannot be read outside of the familiar images of the European Holocaust that the novel evokes. Thus, Just Folks, a youth program reminiscent of Germany’s Hitler Youth, appears to Herman Roth as a tool intended to turn Jewish children against their parents by incorporating them into rural America. It is through Just Folks that Philip’s older brother Sandy spends a summer with the Mawhinneys, a Christian family who owns a tobacco farm in Kentucky. When he returns to Newark tanned, muscular and with a Kentucky accent, his physical appearance seems to speak directly to the felt alienation to his parents and the Jewish community in Newark. Much to his father’s dismay, Sandy’s stay at the Mawhinney farm drives a wedge through the cohesion of the family when he becomes the poster child for the success of Lindbergh’s program.

Similarly, it is difficult to know how to interpret the family’s selection as one of the first families to be relocated to Kentucky under the auspices of Homestead ’42, which, like Just Folks, aims at the integration of Jewish Americans. By moving families permanently to “an inspiring region of America previously inaccessible to them,” the program promises that “parents and children can enrich their Americanness over the generations” (204-205). Yet, the relocation program designed to “encourag[e] America’s religious and national minorities to become further incorporated into the larger society” (85), appears to be a first step in further anti-Semitic measures to follow. Indeed, the novel encourages this analogy since, as Philip notes, “the only minority the OAA appeared to take serious interest in encouraging was ours” (85). For
contemporary readers, however, it is impossible to miss the echoes of similar Nazi relocation programs that such programs immediately call to mind. Despite the lack of foreknowledge which Graham notes, there is a tendency to side with Herman Roth whose worst fears of Nazi policies appear to be confirmed in these programs.

Moreover, this impulse to read the novel through the lens of history regardless of the novel’s fictionality is further strengthened by Roth’s reliance on the historical timeline of European developments that anchors the novel’s fictional events. Even though the novel nominally distances itself from the actual historical events of 1940s America, it fosters the implicit analogies to Nazi Germany. In fact, from the beginning, Roth creates an overlay of fictional events in the United States with a historically accurate timeline of the events taking place in Nazi Germany, drawing from European developments to provide the backdrop for the novel’s actions. Thus, by the time that *The Plot* introduces the fictional Lindbergh as having been awarded the Service Cross of the German Eagle, his ties to, and silent approval of, the *Kristallnacht* and the German persecution of Jews seem to be taken for granted because the novel has already drawn on these events. Far from letting the reader experience without any foreknowledge “what it must have been like,” *The Plot*—despite its counter-factuality—cannot avoid evoking such comparisons. The result is that contemporary readers cannot but read this novel retrospectively through an image of the European Holocaust and the role that Jewish identity has since occupied in American Holocaust memory. The openness for which Graham argues appears to be short-circuited by the comparisons with the familiar historical narratives to which the novel gestures.

Simultaneously, however, Roth challenges the narrative that aligns identity with victimization by showing how the political developments stand in an uneasy causal relationship
to the way they are experienced by the novel’s main characters. Before the Lindbergh nomination, Philip informs the reader that he had not thought much about his Jewish American identity. For Philip, these developments are tied to his growing awareness of his Jewish-American, as opposed to simply American, identity. Assimilated to American life, the awareness of his Jewish identity strikes Philip as odd. In an early scene, Philip is puzzled by a stranger collecting money “toward the establishment of a Jewish national homeland in Palestine” because the “poor old man . . . seemed unable to get it through his head that we’d already had a homeland for three generations . . . . Our homeland was America” (4-5). As a result, Philip’s Jewishness always feels alien to him, as something that is enforced by his Jewish community. It is not until his friend Earl Axman teaches Philip to spot Christians, whom—in a game devised by Earl—the boys begin to follow home during the evening rush from downtown Newark, that Philip comes to see his family as Jewish: “It was then that I realized—employing all the criteria imparted to me by Earl—that my mother looked Jewish. Her hair, her nose, her eyes—my mother looked unmistakably Jewish. But then so must I, who so strongly resembled her. I hadn’t known” (134). Rather than defining identity on its own terms, however, Philip learns to differentiate only by comparison. By the time Lindbergh is inaugurated, Philip internalizes a seemingly proscribed relation of love and hate: “Lindbergh was the first famous living American whom I learned to hate—just as President Roosevelt was the first famous living American whom I was taught to love” (7). What’s important here are the words “learned” and “taught” which, again, effectively reverse causal connections. The felt emotions are not really his own, and rather than being based on a reason that justifies strong feelings like love and hate, the justification resides somewhere outside of his knowledge.
Beginning with the Lindbergh nomination, Philip begins to absorb his parents’ fear, though he often has trouble understanding its causes. For instance, for Philip anti-Semitism seems more like an arbitrary act of intolerance than an effect of a causal relationship. This arbitrariness of intolerance becomes particularly clear when anti-Semitism is portrayed not as a product of its social context but as a product that is literally consumed by the members of the German-American Bund at the local beer garden: “The intoxicant of anti-Semitism. That’s what I came to imagine them all so cheerfully drinking in their beer garden that day” (10). Anti-Semitism is understood here as ingested intolerance. Though this sets up a causal relationship, it is not one that can satisfactorily explain the root of American anti-Semitism. If there is a causal connection, it functions only by analogy to Nazi Germany, thus reifying the fear of anti-Semitism.

This is not to deny, however, that the family begins to encounter discrimination after Lindbergh’s appearance on the political stage. The first instance occurs when the entire family travels to Washington D.C. for a family vacation. Twice, while touring the sights and voicing his dissatisfaction with the newly elected President Lindbergh, Herman Roth is called a “loudmouth Jew.” Then, upon their arrival back at their hotel the family is informed that the room they had moved into a few hours before is no longer available to them and that they would have to find another hotel. The police officer that is subsequently called is unwilling to help, making the Roth family, as Sandy, the oldest son, points out, the victims of “Anti-Semitism” (69). However, it is never entirely clear how these events are to be interpreted and if a ‘plot against America’ is indeed to be blamed for the family’s experience. Identity appears to short-circuit the cause and effect relationship between events, thus fashioning a ‘plot’ where there might be none.
Philip’s trauma, Roth suggests, is not always attributable to the Lindbergh presidency. In fact, the novel plays with the idea that causal relationships can be misrecognized and misread. Indeed, many of these misrecognitions stem directly from Philip’s unreliability as a nine-year-old narrator. As Philip’s statement that “no childhood is without its terrors” (1) indicates at the very beginning of the novel, much of Philip’s fear is based on his own childhood anxieties. For instance, when his childhood friend’s father, who has long suffered from cancer, dies, Philip misreads the signs of the events unfolding before him:

The woman who emerged from the house accompanying the medics wasn’t Mrs. Wishnow but my mother. I couldn’t understand why she was home from work until it dawned on me that the dead father they were carrying away was my own. Yes, of course—my father had committed suicide. He couldn’t take any more of Lindbergh and what Lindbergh was letting the Nazis do to the Jews of Russia and what Lindbergh had done to our family right here and so it was he who had hanged himself.” (169)

Philip is overcome with an unwarranted fear, not only that the tragedy would be his own family’s, but moreover, that it, too, is attributable to the Lindbergh presidency. Extending the causal relationships even further, Philip eventually arrives at the conclusion that the source of his fears originates even earlier: “Jesus Christ, who by their reasoning was everything and who by my reasoning had fucked everything up: because if it weren’t for Christ there wouldn’t be Christians, and if it weren’t for Christians there wouldn’t be anti-Semitism, and if it weren’t for anti-Semitism there wouldn’t be Hitler, and if it weren’t for Hitler Lindbergh would never be president, and if Lindbergh weren’t president. . .” (120). Though this chain of reactions, in the context of the novel, is not entirely ungrounded, it is clearly an exaggeration of a linear causal reaction that simplifies a complex set of relationships. Similarly, Philip’s suspicion that the “transformation of our lives” seems to have come as a “direct consequence of Sandy’s having
eaten bacon, ham, pork chops, and sausage” (100) at the Mawhinney farm speaks to the importance of distinguishing between correlation and causation.

In much of the novel, Roth seems to suggest that it is fear itself that allows the misreading of causal relationships to occur. Particularly important in this context is the way that Roth juxtaposes political fears with other, more benign instances of unwarranted fear. At one point, Philip accidentally locks himself in the Wishnows’ bathroom and becomes terrified, only to discover that the door had, in fact, been unlocked the entire time. This scene is immediately followed by Walter Winchell’s launch of his presidential campaign against Lindbergh, who, as Lindbergh’s most influential Jewish critic, stokes the fears of the Jewish community by telling his audience that state-sanctioned anti-Semitic policies pose an immediate threat to American Jews.

The novel suggests that the separation into distinct social groups in which American Jews define themselves primarily as Jews contributes to establishing them as outsiders. When Winchell addresses Jews on the radio, warning that the latest government actions “mark the beginning of the end for the four and a half million American citizens of Jewish descent” (229), he incites fear among Jews and outrage among Christians for slandering the president. The novel draws a comparison between Kristallnacht and the violence that breaks out in Detroit:

Detroit’s Kristallnacht was similarly justified on the editorial page of the Detroit Times as the unfortunate but inevitable and altogether understandable backlash to the activities of the troublemaking interloper the paper identified as ‘the Jewish demagogue whose aim from the outset had been to incite the rage of patriotic Americans with his treasonous rabble-rousing.’ (266)

Though it is unclear to what extent we are to understand Philip’s fear as reflecting on the political developments, the novel certainly destabilizes any clear connections between cause and effect.
In this way, Roth troubles the notion that autobiography can speak directly to history, an idea that Herman Roth sums up in a warning to his family: “Because what’s history?” he asked rhetorically when he was in his expansive dinnertime instructional mode. “History is everything that happens everywhere. Even here in Newark. Even here on Summit Avenue. Even what happens in his house to an ordinary man—that’ll be history too someday” (180). Yet while the novel seems to confirm, on many levels, Herman’s belief that the private has important implications for the public and the political, Roth consistently undermines the usefulness of personal experience in the writing of history. Thus, when an argument between Herman and Philip’s cousin Alvin about the meaning of the political developments for American Jews erupts into a physical altercation, for Philip this division among family members appears to simply be the latest result of the Lindbergh fight against the Jews:

The South Boston riots, the Detroit riots, the Louisville assassination, the Cincinnati firebombing, the mayhem in St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Buffalo, Akron, Youngstown, Peoria, Scranton, and Syracuse . . . and now this: in an ordinary family living room—traditionally the staging area for the collective effort to hold the line against the intrusions of a hostile world—the anti-Semites were about to be abetted in their exhilarating solution to America’s worst problem by our taking up the cudgels and hysterically destroying ourselves. (295)

Grouped with the political and public events, the personal appears to take on a public significance. However, as the specific reasons for the riots are unknown, so are the causes that lead to Herman’s bloody nose: “Perhaps if Alvin hadn’t shown up in his flashy clothes,” Philip muses, or “perhaps if Winchell hadn’t been assassinated twenty-four hours earlier . . . perhaps then the two grown men who mattered most to me throughout my childhood might never have come so close to murdering each other” (293). Not only does the tentativeness of Philip’s repeated “perhaps” challenge again the causal relationships that link this event to the larger political concerns, but its significance is also exaggerated by Philip’s own subject position. After
all, as the “men who mattered most to me,” the fight leaves an impression on Philip, who admits that though he “didn’t have the capacity in 1942 to begin to decipher all the awful implications . . . just the sight of my father’s and Alvin’s blood was stunning enough” (295). There is little doubt that this episode in Philip’s life affects him, though whether the fight can be understood as an effect of the larger political context ultimately remains uncertain.

Autobiography, in prioritizing subjective experience, runs the risk of skewing the sense of proportion and significance that is accorded the personal in interpreting larger social contexts and histories. The novel further underscores this when on the same night as the domestic fight, anti-Semitic violence appears to reach a new level. After Herman returns from the hospital that night “to the befouled and littered battlefield that was now our flat,” Philip notes, “gunshots erupted on Chancellor Avenue. Shots, screaming, shouting, sirens—the pogrom had begun” (298). However, only hours later—though the Roths don’t learn the truth until the next morning—it becomes clear that the events had been exaggerated:

The firing went on for less than an hour . . . the gun battle had been not between the city police and the anti-Semites but between the police and the Jewish police. There’d been no pogrom in Newark but between the police and the Jewish police. There’d been no pogrom in Newark that night, just a shootout, extraordinary for having occurred within earshot of our house but otherwise not much different from the disorder that could erupt in any large city after dark. (299-300)

What makes the shooting significant then is not its political implications, but rather the novelty of it having occurred just outside the Roth’s home. Here it is clear that the private experience does not necessarily speak accurately to the public or the historical facts.

2.5 Conclusion: A Note to the Reader

Alternate history in The Plot, rather than providing access to authentic memory, as Graham might have it, works to expose the way that cultural memory itself is the subject of
narrative shaping. Rosenfeld has argued that, “[o]ddly enough, alternate histories lend themselves very well to being studied as documents of memory for the same reason that most historians have dismissed them as useless for the study of history—their fundamental subjectivity” (12). *The Plot* makes apparent, in its reception, the level to which readers and critics approach even admitted counterfactual history through the lens of trauma. Trauma, it becomes clear, occupies in its own right an important role in understanding history, and in so doing, tends to ignore other causal and temporal relationships. As such, the usefulness of trauma narratives is necessarily limited even as they have proliferated across the US. Peter Novick has argued that the kind of identification these narratives evoke, rather than challenging our understanding of history, seems to simply confirm popular beliefs. He writes: “the typical ‘confrontation’ with the Holocaust for visitors of the American Holocaust museums, and in burgeoning curricula, does not incline us toward thinking of ourselves as potential victimizers—rather the opposite. It is an article of faith in these encounters that one should ‘identify with the victims,’ thus acquiring a warm glow of virtue that such a vicarious identification brings” (Novick 13). Like the Anne Frank narrative in the 1950s and 70s, there is a political significance to the way that *The Plot* has been received, a significance that Roth aims to expose.

In a “Note to the Reader” that prefaces the extensive postscript in which Roth provides facts and timelines of the actual historical personages and events, Roth writes that “*The Plot Against America* is a work of fiction” (364). The disclaimer as well as the inclusion of such a postscript seems odd in a work of fiction, but it once again underlines the novel’s constructedness. On the surface, *The Plot Against America* appears to follow the logic of identification, and it is the underlying assumption for Graham when he argues that the novel allows the reader to experience “how it must have been.” In fact, the novel encourages
identification with Philip’s experiences and thus it sets up an autobiographical narrative that seemingly allows access to some ‘authentic’ historical knowledge. However, upon closer analysis, it becomes clear that in a counterfactual history such knowledge is always already foreclosed. Appearing in 2004, *The Plot* must be understood as a reflection on Holocaust memory production in the US that reveals the persistence with which readers and critics approach even admittedly counterfactual history through the lens of trauma. If the novel contains a warning, then, it is not about the importance of preventing an American Holocaust, but about paying heed to the extent to which cultural memory itself appears as the subject of narrative shaping.
Notes

1 Rosenfeld writes: “At conferences where I spoke about alternate history, more than a few prominent scholars raised epistemological, methodological, and even moral objections to it. Some argued that since history deals solely with the description and interpretation of events that really happened, exploring what might have happened but never did amounted to little more than idle speculation based on sheer fancy or wishful thinking. Others expressed skepticism about the value of examining works of popular culture, insisting that they were of inferior quality compared with works of high culture, that they were of marginal relevance, and that they were therefore unworthy of serious consideration” (Rosenfeld 3-4).

2 As Jason Siegel has argued, the novel emphasizes “the mere contingency by which we do not find ourselves living in a fascist state” whose threat is not limited to 1940s America, but whose “potential . . . remains present” (148).


4 See Kellman, Steven G. “It Is Happening Here: The Plot Against America and the Political Moment.”

5 See Kremer, S. Lillian. Witness Through the Imagination: Jewish American Holocaust Literature


7 Naomi Sokoloff, for instance, has pointed to the novel’s reflection on plot as a way of knowledge production. She writes: “Throughout the novel, a metanarrative or masterplot—the historical record of genocide—looms large and heavily influences all the narrated events. Amid all this, the subplots present a significant revision of previous Roth plots, replacing stories of self-absorption and escape from history with an emphasis on reentry into history. Finally, personal life stories in this novel yield plots that highlight the dilemmas of individuals within the whirlwind of major national events, and these developments direct readers to think about ways of knowing history—both in terms of coherent overviews (teleologically unfolding events) and in terms of confusing process (as yet unfinished, filled with contradictions, informed by fragmented or partial perspectives). These elements of the text draw attention to the constructedness of plot and to personal decision making: the choices individuals make when faced with dire political developments.” (312)

8 For a critique of “paranoid reading,” see Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity
Peter Brooks, has described the structuring activity that is inherent to plot as “plotting.” He writes: “Plot as we have defined it is the organizing line and intention of narrative, thus perhaps best conceived as an activity, a structuring operation elicited in the reader trying to make sense of those meanings that develop only through textual and temporal succession” (37). For Brooks, plot is not a passive revelation of truth but rather an “active shaping force, the product of our refusal to allow temporality to be meaningless” (323).

Schaub writes: “Though the thinking of Reich, Fromm, and Adorno was originally motivated by the rise of National Socialism, liberal discourse in the United States throughout the 1940s tended to conflate fascism and communism as similar totalitarian systems, that took root in the anxious passivity of the masses” (16).

See Cole 29.

Almost from its earliest publication, the Diary had been the subject of editing. It began with small changes that sought to minimize the quarrels between Anne and her mother and to downplay the relationship between Anne and Peter. Prior to its publication in Germany, Anne’s negative references to Germans were edited out so as to not offend German readers. However, as Tim Cole argues in Selling the Holocaust, “[i]t was arguably when this innocent ‘Anne Frank’ was exported to the United States that she underwent the greatest changes” (Cole 29).

See Novick 83.

See Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem.

Novick writes: “There was a shift in focus to Jewish victims rather than German perpetrators that made its discussion more palatable in the continuing cold war climate” (144).

Samuel Moyn has argued that the decline of the significance of the Cold War brought about an increasing interest in apolitical and humanitarian aid. For Moyn the focus on ethics that humanitarian projects promised increasingly developed into a real alternative to exiting political structures. By the mid-1970s, as it became clear that capitalism was vulnerable to ethics violations that had thus far been attributed only to totalitarian governments and the moral framework of humanitarian aid as well as a new articulation of “human rights” seemed to provide an alternative: “It is one thing . . . to examine the states that claimed to advance the cause of human rights in the midst of the 1970s in an unprecedented fashion, most especially Jimmy Carter’s America, and to canvass those regimes that were stigmatized in a dismaying—though rarely disabling—new manner. But it is another to explain why, at this moment, human rights broke through so substantially on the terrain of idealism, for ordinary people, and in public life. The death of other utopian visions and their transfiguration into a human rights agenda provides the most powerful way to do so” (Moyn 122).

According to Novick: “the most important thing about the Eichmann trial was that it was the first time that what we now call the Holocaust was presented to the American public as an entity in its own right, distinct from Nazi barbarism in general. In the United States, the word
‘Holocaust’ first became firmly attached to the murder of European Jewry as a result of the trial” (133).

18 See Young 10.
3. AFTER TRAUMA: HISTORY AND AFFECT IN W.G. SEBALD’S AUSTERLITZ

3.1 Introduction

In the only footnote to W.G. Sebald’s Austerlitz, the novel’s unnamed narrator reflects on his visit to the Lucerne train station during a trip to Switzerland in 1971. He recalls his reaction upon discovering that the station had been destroyed by a fire not long after his own departure from the city:

[O]n the night of 4 February, long after I was fast asleep in my hotel room in Zurich, a fire broke out in Lucerne Station, spread very rapidly and entirely destroyed the doomed building. I could not get the picture I saw next day in the newspapers and on television out of my head for several weeks, and they gave me an uneasy, anxious feeling which crystallized into the idea that I had been to blame, or at least one of those to blame for the Lucerne fire. In my dreams, even years later, I sometimes saw the flames leaping from the dome and lighting up the entire panorama of the snow-covered Alps. (10-11n.)

This moment in the text is representative of the tone of much of Sebald’s work, which tends to be preoccupied with images of destruction and the haunting qualities of traumatic experience.

For many critics, Sebald’s melancholic style is directly related to his status as a contemporary German writer of the Holocaust—such critics find in Sebald’s work evidence of the continued traumatic imprint that the crimes of the Third Reich have left upon today’s German citizens.¹ Yet, even in Austerlitz, Sebald’s most sustained engagement with the Holocaust, the origin of this trauma is not directly localizable. Expressions of guilt and responsibility, wherever they appear in the novel, lack a clear traumatic object. Having departed Lucerne before the outbreak of the fire, the narrator’s knowledge of it is mediated exclusively by the following day’s news reports. Despite the images of the flames consuming the station that haunt the narrator’s dreams, it is not the actual destruction of the Lucerne station that causes the narrator’s “uneasy, anxious feeling”; rather, these emotions stem from the recollection of a memory of a perceived past guilt.
Not having been present at the outbreak of the fire, the narrator’s sense of responsibility is marked by a spatial and temporal distance, which echoes the relation of the postwar generation to the events of the Holocaust. Like the narrator’s experience of the Lucerne station fire, for Sebald’s generation (Sebald was born in 1944), the relationship to the past, while marked by the destruction of the war, is nevertheless difficult to define. Rather than simply rehearsing a standard narrative about historical guilt, *Austerlitz* opens up a new set of questions regarding victims, perpetrators, and historical responsibility by thematizing the troubled temporalities of transgenerational memory. In what follows, I read Sebald’s melancholy against many of the accounts that seek to position Sebald in the context of trauma narratives. I suggest that rather than centering on the generalized melancholic repetition of trauma, Sebald draws on *concrete* instances of the troubling past in order to generate new political possibilities for thinking about how historical injury might be productively addressed in the post-Holocaust present. Specifically, I argue that Sebald finds an alternative to traumatic narratives in the politically generative language of affect.

Sebald’s novel participates in a critical tradition that, over the past 25 years, has tried to make sense of Germany’s positioning in a post-Holocaust present. Though a silence regarding the Holocaust had characterized much of the postwar period, the *Historikerstreit* (historians’ clash)—which began in 1986 with a public exchange between Ernst Nolte and Jürgen Habermas in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* and *Die Zeit*—broke that silence. This exchange concerned the unique status of the Holocaust in German history with some historians arguing, with Nolte, that the crimes of the Holocaust were ultimately comparable to those perpetrated by the Stalinist system of gulags. This argument was opposed by others who, like Habermas, warned that such relativizing claims amounted to an attempt at whitewashing the German past.²
This public debate had its precursors in the Bitburg controversy a year earlier, in which conflicting views about the war’s commemoration had already led to a flaring up of these fundamental disagreements. The Bitburg debate began when Chancellor Helmut Kohl invited Ronald Reagan to participate in the V-E Day commemoration by laying down a wreath at the Kolmershöhe military cemetery. After Reagan had accepted the invitation, it became publicly known that 49 members of the Waffen-SS were also laid to rest there. Among the American protestors against Reagan’s planned visit was Elie Wiesel, who demanded that the President not attend. Despite the protests, and in order to mitigate any offense to the German Chancellor, Reagan did lay down a wreath at the cemetery in a short visit that lasted no longer than eight minutes. What was intended as a gesture of reconciliation between the two countries instead resulted in an increase of tensions.

Bitburg made tangible the conflicting opinions that a year later would be subject of the debate between Nolte and Habermas. Could Germans ever be understood as victims, either of the Nazis—as Reagan had attempted to argue in justifying his intent to accept Kohl’s invitation—or of the Soviet regime? Or would Germans always have to carry the burden of guilt, as the narrator demonstrates in the opening quote? Forty years after the end of the war, how could collective responsibility be addressed? It was thus altogether unclear what role the agreed “tragedy” of the Holocaust was to play in the present. For Helmut Kohl in 1985, past wrongs had been redressed; in the postwar years, Germany had paid reparations to Israel and Jewish victims, and Germany’s political leaders had publicly acknowledged and apologized for its past. Kohl had proven an ally by standing with Reagan, against public protest, on the deployment of US missiles in West Germany. If reconciliation and closure were not possible now, then what would be required?
What the Bitburg controversy and the Historikerstreit revealed was that a post-Holocaust present could not be defined by temporal remove alone.

For W.G. Sebald, writing after the collapse of the Soviet Union and German reunification, these questions have a renewed significance. Indeed, many suggested that perhaps \textit{this} was the time for closure.\textsuperscript{4} Sebald’s work, with its enormous success in the English-speaking world, is thus especially in a position to negotiate the conflicting accounts.\textsuperscript{5} It is my contention that Sebald, instead of taking sides in the debate whether or not closure has been or should be achieved, fundamentally shifts the terms of the discussion. Instead of addressing the present in terms of retribution for past wrongs, Sebald asks us to question the anxieties that accompany present engagements with historical injury. Might we then read the quote that opened this chapter not only as a melancholic mourning of destruction but also as a strangely misplaced assumption of guilt and responsibility? And yet, are not those feelings precisely the ones at stake in the Historikerstreit’s preoccupation with redress and closure? In what follows, I suggest that Sebald challenges engagements with the past that frame contemporary responsibility in terms of trauma and forgetting.

Sebald has addressed the German relationship to its past in his essay “Luftkrieg und Literatur” (“Air War and Literature”), which was based on Sebald’s 1997 Zürich lectures. When it first appeared, the essay was met with some criticism for its taboo treatment of German victimhood. Not only did Sebald argue that Germans were victims of the air raids at the end of the war but he also accused the previous generation of not having publicly voiced their grievances at the time. In the essay, Sebald insists that the bombings, which he describes in graphic detail, were traumatizing to the population of cities like Dresden, Cologne, and Hamburg and that this trauma had been repressed throughout the postwar years by those who experienced
it. Though the bombings continued, beyond reasonable strategic necessity, to target civilian populations, most Germans, he argues, accepted their ambivalent role as aggressors, which made it particularly difficult to make any legal or moral claims on the Allies’ treatment. Thus, many Germans reacted passively to the bombing campaigns, almost as though they were “an act of retribution on the part of a higher power with which there could be no dispute” (14). Most importantly, however, Sebald argues that the postwar period was characterized by the desire to move past the humiliation of defeat, and adopt the forward-looking attitude that paved the way to the “economic miracle” of the 1950s. Indeed, even at the time of his lecture in 1997, Sebald argues, Germany’s self-image was characterized by the psychic repression of the postwar experience. Particularly telling is Sebald’s example of a booklet on the city of Worms in the immediate postwar years that contrasts a picture of a destroyed city street to its modern appearance. The caption that accompanies the former reads, “Kämmerstrasse: Kein Haus überstand das Inferno” (“Kämmerstrasse: not a single house survived the inferno”) while the latter picture is captioned, “Schöner und breiter entstand sie wieder” (“Rebuilt, it appears bigger and more beautiful”) (6-7). In its focus on improvements and modernizations, these captions appear to ignore the city’s devastation. Here the destroyed city appears like a blank slate, a signifier of its, as of yet, unfulfilled potential; what is lost, Sebald implies, is an acknowledgment of the destruction that is made tangible by the rubble that had at one time been the city street. The destruction of Germany’s major cities, Sebald argues, has not played a significant role in collective consciousness and has “never played any appreciable part in the discussion of the internal constitution of our country” (4). In the essay, Sebald demands an acknowledgment of the material traces of the past which had been mostly absent in political and literary accounts of the postwar years.
The status of Sebald’s emphasis on the victimization of Germans has been difficult to ascertain and has led some reviewers to suggest that the essay was an attempt to exculpate Germans by framing the bombing campaigns as a form of victimization akin to what Germans had done to the Jews. Critics, however, have generally dismissed claims of Sebald’s essay as an example of Aufrechnungsdiskurs (tallying moral equity). Sebald, born in the Allgäu in 1944, unlike those writers of an earlier generation (Erich Nossack, Alexander Kluge, Hubert Fichte), has not experienced the air raids firsthand; he depends on these very texts that he critiques in order to reconstruct the history of those air raids. For Andreas Huyssen, Sebald’s vehement attack on the earlier writers thus can be explained as a “kind of compensation . . . for the fact that [he] . . . has no access to the experience or memory of the air war except through these earlier texts that he is compelled to rewrite, in a kind of literary version of transgenerational trauma” (150). For Huyssen, any attempt at closure ultimately leads to a kind of traumatic repetition that is fundamentally different from the traumatization experienced by the war generation. Thus, the only way to conceive of trauma in this context is to consider the German populations’ “multilayered traumatic experiences,” (146) which include a wide spectrum of emotions related to the humiliation of German defeat, the air raids, and the Holocaust. National trauma then, for Huyssen, stems not from Germans’ own war experiences, but rather is dependent on narratives about the trauma of others. Though he does not exactly suggest that Sebald’s essay falls into a kind of Freudian melancholic repetition from which there is nothing to be learned, Huyssen’s approach—the claim that each repetition of the articulation of traumatic experience results in further “acknowledgment and recognition” (146) of public memory—ultimately resists a productive engagement with, or, as Dominick LaCapra might put it, the possibility of “working through,” trauma.
Huyssen’s reading of Sebald’s essay here, I would argue, is representative of the limitations of precisely the forms of trauma theory from which Sebald seeks to distance himself in Luftkrieg und Literatur. For many scholars of trauma, the initial traumatic rupture is a site that is always unfinished, continually recreated and fashioned anew with each testimony. Understood as traumatic repetition, Sebald’s claim for the recognition of German trauma cannot but function as a confirmation of the centrality of 1945 in the German contemporary moment. If, as Huyssen suggests, Sebald’s text simply posits the most recent instance of a traumatic repetition that originates at the end of the war, then all possibilities for a modern post-Auschwitz subjectivity are foreclosed. If, in other words, the Holocaust functions as the founding event for all future generations, then there is no present iteration of German subjectivity that is free of its traces. The framing of 1945 as the crucial moment of traumatic return—a position shared by many critics, particularly by those engaged in American trauma studies—I would argue is unnecessarily limiting. Indeed, to privilege such an approach is to miss some of Sebald’s most interesting claims about the possibilities for postwar political subjectivity.

Sebald, I would contend, is not in fact interested in claiming the air raids as a German trauma. Rather than assigning blame or locating in the air raids a site of continued pain, Sebald instead seeks to acknowledge that past’s role in shaping the present condition of the nation. After all, the repression of these events had some positive effects and was crucial to achieving Germany’s rapid recovery and rebuilding. It made possible, Sebald argues, not only the “economic miracle,” but also fostered a sense of national unity. “[T]he stream of psychic energy that has not dried up to this day,” Sebald writes, “has its source in the well-kept secret of the corpses built into the foundations of our state, a secret that bound all Germans together in the postwar years, and indeed still binds them, more closely than any positive goal such as the
realization of democracy ever could” (13). Sebald thus asks for an acknowledgment of this repressed history not in order to redefine Germany’s role as victim or to reframe narratives about the past. Rather, the physical destruction of Germany’s cities ought to be recognized as part of the nation’s history because not doing so would amount to a misrecognition of Germany’s present.

Though for some critics Sebald’s approach to German history appears to amount to little more than a refusal to commit firmly to either Nolte’s or Habermas’ position (an ambivalence which, as Huysen shows, must ultimately fail), I suggest that Sebald posits an alternative way of conceiving of an understanding of the past in which these conflicts are not resolved or avoided but rather harnessed for their political potential. As Bitburg shows, transgenerational trauma challenges the stability of ethical categories, such as the victim/perpetrator binary, on which the language of trauma theory depends. Yet, as Bitburg further illustrates, traumatic experience does not cease to be politically relevant in cases where traumatic injury has not been experienced first-hand. Sebald, then, is interested precisely in this continued relevance of historical injury in the present that is not adequately addressed by the language of trauma.

For Sebald, as has been widely noted, literary texts provide a privileged basis for these encounters with the past. Criticizing many of the first generation of postwar German writers for their rehearsal of official narratives and their refusal to address the air raids (most notably Erich Nossack and Hermann Kasak), Sebald locates a productive model of literary engagements with the past in the work of Alexander Kluge. Beyond the distanced descriptions of the destruction of German cities that Sebald critiques in many of the German writers, Kluge’s work, he argues, promotes a responsibility towards the past whose strength lies precisely in his detailing of the destruction “[die] fatel[e] Tendenz bisheriger Geschichte im Detail kenntlich zu machen” (99).
Specifically, Sebald responds to the way in which Kluge translates physical destruction into forms of literary expression that account for the physical objects’ network of relations, such as the fallen trees in the city park which, in the eighteenth century, when the park was built, used to house silkworms.\(^\text{12}\) It is this literary style, whose details speak to the dense texture of interconnected historical narratives that Sebald develops in his fiction, and specifically in his final novel, *Austerlitz*. Extending the themes of “Luftkrieg und Literatur,” I will contend that, in *Austerlitz* Sebald uses the specificity of physical objects and architectural spaces to construct an alternative temporal framework that can account for past injury without overdetermining the political potential of the present.

### 3.2 The Distant Present

Jacques Austerlitz, is a Jewish emigrant, who, as a child fleeing Hitler’s advance in Czechoslovakia, arrives in Bala, Wales with the *Kindertransport* in 1939. Having forgotten much of his Prague childhood and the circumstances of his emigration, Austerlitz begins a journey through Europe in order not only to reconstruct the last months of the lives of his parents who died at the hands of the Nazis, but also to retrace the journey which had first brought him to his life in exile. Through a series of conversations with an unnamed first-person narrator, the reader becomes a witness to Austerlitz’s struggle to make sense of what he learns. Because *Austerlitz*, of all of Sebald’s body of work, most directly engages with the Holocaust, many critics read the novel in the context of other narratives of Holocaust trauma. Reading *Austerlitz* through the lens of trauma theory, however, I suggest is often complicated by the many formal elements of Sebald’s text which persistently work to destabilize such a narrative.
Particularly troubling for trauma theory scholars is the fact that Austerlitz’s story is not narrated directly by him, but is instead filtered through the voice of a German first-person narrator who relates their conversations to the reader. The role of the witness as a key participant in the creation of the traumatic narrative, of course, has been crucial to trauma theory from its inception. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, in one of the field’s seminal works *Testimony*, argue that the listener functions not only as “a blank screen on which the [traumatic] event comes to be inscribed for the first time,” but, by hearing the victim’s testimony, also “comes to be a participant and co-owner of the traumatic event” (57). However, in *Austerlitz* this victim-witness relationship is complicated by the fact the narrator/witness is German. Katja Garloff, for instance, who reads the novel as an engagement with historical trauma, acknowledges this uneasy relationship in which the Jewish storyteller requires a German historian to “put the story together and transmit it to the readers” (166). Garloff ultimately resolves this problem by dismissing the narrator’s identity as a mere narrative device, yet the undeniable centrality of the narrator in the text remains troubling in a reading that depends on the stability of the victim-perpetrator binary.

Still, on the surface, *Austerlitz* shares many similarities with other trauma narratives, which, as Cathy Caruth has argued, are marked by a “narrative of belated experience” which “far from telling of an escape from reality . . . attests to its endless impact on a life” (7).\(^\text{13}\) Indeed, Austerlitz’s life in exile is defined by the absence of *Herkunft* and *Heimat* (origin and “home”)—the familial and cultural ties that form the basis on which to define his own identity. Though Austerlitz possesses some early childhood memories, he is plagued by his inability to remember others or to remember them correctly. Soon upon his arrival in Wales, Austerlitz’s old life begins to fade from his memory, along with the Czech language and the image of his parents. Austerlitz
recalls that he “often lay awake for hours in [his] narrow bed in the manse, trying to conjure up the faces of those whom [he] had left” (45), but increasingly fails to do so.

Belatedness of traumatic experience in the novel is, however, not limited to that of personal experience. As a child, Austerlitz, unable to articulate his sense of loss, remembers filling this perceived void with alternative narratives of origin. Thus, he recalls identifying with the Biblical image of the children of Israel, whose “camp in the wilderness was closer to me than life in Bala, which I found more incomprehensible every day” (58). This image appears to confirm the understanding of *Austerlitz* as a narrative of trauma that is not limited to a personal origin narrative, but, more significantly, this paradigmatic image ties him to the larger history of Jewish trauma.14

But if the novel appears to invite a reading in which Austerlitz’s experience becomes representative of the trauma endured by the European Jews during the war, *Austerlitz* simultaneously resists the conflations of personal and cultural traumas. After all, his name signifies far beyond an exclusively Jewish heritage and Holocaust experience. Having lost his name during his transition to his life in exile, Austerlitz adopts the name Dafydd Elias, given to him by his foster parents. It is not until Austerlitz attends boarding school that he learns about his birth name, Jacques Austerlitz. Initially, rather than connecting him with his past, the unfamiliar name leaves Austerlitz even more isolated: “At first, what disconcerted me most was that I could connect no ideas at all with the word *Austerlitz*. If my new name had been Morgan or Jones, I could have related it to reality. I even knew the name *Jacques* from a French nursery rhyme. But I had never heard of an Austerlitz before” (67). Seeking familial connection, Austerlitz researches his new name, but apart from learning that Fred Astaire was in fact born “Fred Austerlitz” and finding a reference to a man named Austerlitz in Kafka’s writing, he fails to
locate any relatives. When Austerlitz eventually does begin to identify with his name, it is not through familial or even Jewish ties, but rather through the historical battle of Austerlitz, which gives him “the idea . . . of being linked in some mysterious way to the glorious past of the people of France” (72). While Austerlitz’s imagined relationship with the battle of Austerlitz, like his childhood identification with the children of Israel, is exemplary of the kind of fictions that underlie all origin narratives, it signifies beyond personal and cultural self-discovery. While the battle of Austerlitz, one of the decisive battles of the Napoleonic Wars that would lead to the end of the Holy Roman Empire, marks the beginning of modern history, his name’s evocation of “Auschwitz,” simultaneously suggests the culmination of the Enlightenment promise of modern progress. *Austerlitz* thus maps multiple histories which, while intertwined, speak not to a singular traumatic disruption, but rather to a larger melancholic history.¹⁵

In a context that intertwines these multifaceted histories, it becomes difficult to name any one originary traumatic disruption that characterizes Austerlitz’s sense of belatedness. While not denying that the effects of Austerlitz’s life in exile are most readily readable as those of traumatic experience, his relationship to Holocaust trauma remains one of indirection. Though he loses both parents to Nazi persecution, their experience remains elusive to Austerlitz. Having departed Czechoslovakia almost two years before the deportation of his mother, his experience is marked by a temporal and spatial remove.¹⁶ If it is possible to speak of Holocaust trauma in *Austerlitz*, then it is not as the trauma of having experienced it, but as the trauma of not having been there.¹⁷ Belatedness here refers not to a belated understanding of one’s traumatic experience; rather, belatedness appears as a fundamental condition of the present. Indeed, Austerlitz’s present is not marked by an event that disrupts an otherwise coherent historical narrative. On the contrary, his present is characterized by ongoing sense of fragmentation; it is
the absence of knowledge about the past, not the traumatizing memory of it, that determines Austerlitz’s condition. It is, then, not trauma in the strict sense—as the concept is employed from Felman to Agamben—that underlies Austerlitz’s condition. Rather, in *Austerlitz*, belatedness may be better captured by what Lauren Berlant has recently described as “systemic crisis.” While trauma signifies an “exception that has just shattered some ongoing, uneventful ordinary life,” Berlant argues that crisis “is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary” (10). Rather than a catastrophic interruption, then, Berlant conceives of the present as a crisis that, as it unfolds, exists outside of existing frameworks for understanding. Though it shares with trauma the inability to be immediately articulated, Berlant stresses the ordinariness of these failures which underlie any conception of the present.

In *Austerlitz*, the events of the past which include Austerlitz’s life in Prague, the Holocaust and the history of modern Europe, all remain equally inaccessible. Against the reading of *Austerlitz* as trauma narrative, then, I propose that we understand Austerlitz as inhabiting an ongoing present which, though conditioned by these various histories, is not directly caused by them. Austerlitz shares this lack of access to the past with subsequent generations who do not have any firsthand experience of this history. His struggle is thus symbolic of a wider meta-problem: the status of identity formation in the contemporary present. Sebald’s goal in *Austerlitz*, I would contend, is precisely a critical engagement with the way that the past resonates in the present. And it is in this context that we must read the novel’s narrative structure as constructing an alternative temporal framework through which to thematize this relationship.

While time in *Austerlitz* generally moves chronologically, beginning with the first meeting between Austerlitz and the narrator in 1967 and ending sometime in 1996, the style of the text disrupts this linearity. Specifically the meetings between Austerlitz and the narrator
appear to be taking place outside of the linearity of time. Time in between encounters does not seem to be moving for Austerlitz, who, the narrator remarks after seeing Austerlitz after a twenty year absence, “had not changed at all in either his carriage or his clothing, and even had the rucksack still slung over his shoulder . . . while I had always thought he was about ten years older than I, he now seemed ten years younger” (39). Their conversations, too, appear unaffected by the passage of time. From their first meeting, their encounters are always a mere condition of the present, leaving no room for the unexpected. When the narrator approaches Austerlitz for the first time in the Salle des pas perdus of the Centraal Station in Antwerp, Austerlitz does not seem “at all surprised by [his] direct approach but answered [him] at once, without the slightest hesitation” (7-8). And even though almost all of their subsequent meetings are chance encounters, with several long periods of absence, the narrator states that “we simply went on with our conversation, wasting no time in commenting on the improbability of our meeting in a place like this, which no sensible person would have sought out” (28). Thus, the novel suggests a constant present, despite the chronological movement of time. This present, however, does not exist independently of the past. Though Austerlitz has forgotten much about his childhood and knows little about his parents’ deportations, the constant present is still one that is shaped by the hold the past has on him. He remembers just enough to perceive the unknown as a lack.

While the novel’s structure works to undercut any possibility of apprehending the past, the present proves to be similarly elusive. The unfolding of Austerlitz’s story occurs exclusively in the past tense as he recounts his life to the narrator in later conversations. Austerlitz’s narrative of past events is then further removed from the present through the narrator who likewise recollects his conversations with Austerlitz. This double-remove often results in awkward grammatical structures that attempt to unify disparate past moments and actors (for
example, “Und ich entsinnte mich, so erzählte mir Vera, sagte Austerlitz, daß . . .” [230] [“I remember, Vera told me, said Austerlitz, that . . .”] [159-160]). This double-narration creates a delay which makes explicit the inaccessibility of the present moment thus recounted. The novel is always trying to catch up with itself, and yet it finds itself falling further and further behind. Austerlitz the novel, then, just like Austerlitz’s own past, is always just out of reach of the present of the narrative. It is precisely this always foreclosed present that is the main consideration of the novel.

Against the always-present and the always-past, Sebald posits a third alternative of the perception of time which is attuned to the many complex currents that make up the present moment. Exemplary of this understanding is the narrator’s account of visiting Breendonk, a Belgian fortification from World War I, which also served as a German prison camp during World War II. As he tours Breendonk, the narrator recalls being struck by its history which seems to him suddenly alive. He recalls his vivid experience:

I do remember that there in the casemate at Breendonk a nauseating smell of soft soap rose to my nostrils, and that this smell, in some strange place in my head, was linked to the bizarre German word for scrubbing brush, *Wurzelbürste*, which was a favorite of my father’s and which I had always disliked. Black striations began to quiver before my eyes, and I had to rest my forehead against the wall, which was gritty, covered with bluish spots, and seemed to me perspiring with cold beads of sweat. It was not that as the nausea rose in me I guessed at the kind of third-degree interrogations which were being conducted here around the time I was born, since it was only a few years later that I read Jean Améry’s description of the dreadful physical closeness between torturers and their victims, and the tortures he himself suffered in Breendonk. (25-26)21

The narrator is overcome with a multitude of sensory perceptions, which combine with fragments of remembered events; impressions drawn from a subjective as well as collective memory. Multiple sources of knowledge, from across different historical moments, thus come together in the narrator’s perception that inform the present of Breendonk. While one could say
that only the “nauseating smell of soft soap” is ‘real,’ the other impressions feel no less real to the narrator. Even though several moments of historical time and sources of knowledge appear to coexist here in this one memory, and are filtered through his subjective experience, they still offer an insight to the history of Breendonk that seems to transcend the realm of subjectivity. The narrator’s experience provides a glimpse into the past, which unlike Proustian memory, is not one he has himself experienced. Rather, this experience reveals an affective connection to the history of injury at Breendonk. Though the narrator himself has no access to the past of the fortification other than through historical accounts, the affective reaction nevertheless allows access to the injury committed there. In this moment the narrator is overcome with an emotional response that is part his own, and part other; it is situated in the present as much as it is derived from the past. 22

Eric Santner has noted the significance of material objects in Sebald’s fiction as a way to provide a link with the past, which he has termed “spectral materialism.” Santner argues that this notion “involves, among other things, a capacity to register the persistence of past suffering that has in some sense been absorbed into the substance of lived space, into the ‘setting’ of human history” (57-58). Indeed, at Breendonk the narrator is attuned to the injury committed here, yet this connection, I would argue, is not a one-way street. The physical space of the Breendonk fortress functions not simply as a passive vessel of a forgotten past but, importantly, it is itself drawn into a dynamic affective relationship with the narrator. While the smell in the cavernous space first triggers the narrator’s nausea, there is a sense of an affective reciprocity when, as though reflecting his own physical reaction, the wall seems to be “perspiring with cold beads of sweat” (25-26). At Breendonk we get a first glimpse of the capacity to affect that Sebald attributes to the materiality of objects and architectural spaces that will be critical in his
articulation of the temporality of the present and to which I will return shortly. First, however, I would like to turn to the importance of affect itself.

The reason that the narrator’s affective response to the fragments of memory at Breendonk is so critical is precisely because affect precedes narrative. Brian Massumi has argued that affect, as intensity which, unlike emotions, is not (yet) formed “into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning” (28). Because affect is simultaneous inside the body, yet external to conscious articulation, it is an excess which functions as “potential for interaction” (35) of actualized embodiments. In other words, when the narrator experiences an influx of affective images and memories, he does not have a linguistic or ideological framework in which to fit them. Thus, the experience holds the potential for new ways of thinking and for new kinds of articulations of experience and interactions with the past.

In the context of Breendonk, it would certainly be problematic to argue, as Massumi tends to imply, that affect is objectless. After all, Améry’s writing as well as the narrator’s own subjective memories and imagined image of the fortification are heavily influenced by external points of reference. The emotions they elicit, each in their own right, are shaped by prior experience, ideological or moral judgments. Emotional responses, though they are prior to narrative, are not independent of context. The fact that Breendonk triggers these particular memories and emotional reactions for the narrator is certainly conditioned by his prior recognition of them as having meaning in an ideological context in which Breendonk appears as an object of pain in the context of its function as prison during the war. It is ideologically shaped by this culturally transmitted knowledge about it. What differentiates the narrator’s experience from a mere repetition and reinforcement of preexisting notions, however, is the fact that its particular makeup of divergent emotional reactions prohibits it from being immediately
reabsorbed into the selfsame ideological frameworks. Affect here, in other words, resists immediate narrativization.

### 3.3 Past as Fiction

Narrativization, Sebald suggests—following Walter Benjamin—lies at the heart of the notion of historical progress. The progress narrative that developed out of Enlightenment rationality and which depends on the teleological view that history gradually leads to an improvement of the human condition, Benjamin asserts, “did not hold to reality, but had a dogmatic claim.” The misguided belief that progress ultimately leads to perfection, Austerlitz argues, can be seen in the architectural structures of nineteenth century fortifications. For instance, in the course of their first conversation in Antwerp, Austerlitz points out how “the star-shaped dodecagon behind trenches had finally crystallized, out of the various available systems, as the preferred ground plan” which appeared “as an emblem both of absolute power and of the ingenuity the engineers put to the service of that power” (15-16). Yet in this presumed perfection, Austerlitz continues, “it had been forgotten that the largest fortifications will naturally attract the largest enemy forces” (16). Thus, he suggests that “outrsize buildings cast the shadow of their own destruction before them, and are designed from the first with an eye to their later existence as ruins” (19). For Austerlitz, the notion of progress is always predestined to result in destruction. Humans, he suggests, do not, in fact, learn from their mistakes due to their self-sustaining investment in the belief of progress itself. In the case of the destruction of Antwerp’s city walls in 1832, Austerlitz states, “the only conclusion anyone drew from it, incredibly, was that the defenses surrounding the city must be rebuilt even more strongly than before, and moved further out” (17). Unlike birds “who keep building the same nest over thousands of years,”
Austerlitz argues, “we tend to forge ahead with our projects far beyond any reasonable bounds” (18). Sebald too, critiques the notion of progress which appears as an incessant repetition of the same mistakes.

While for some critics, Sebald’s insistence on progress-as-destruction ultimately relies on the language of trauma, such readings tend to miss Sebald’s critique of narrativizing history—both as narrative of progress and as narrative of destruction. Though the concepts of destruction and loss are certainly crucial for Sebald, in Austerlitz he articulates an alternative relationship towards the present which begins precisely by outlining the political limits of historical narrative, even as it attests to the desirability of generating them. Before Austerlitz begins his journey to Prague to discover the origin of his own identity, he explains to the narrator that he has been engaged in “collecting [his] fragmentary studies in a book,” conceived as a comprehensive “history of architecture and civilization” (120). However, he confesses his inability to coherently connect the various fragments he had collected over the years:

Now and then a train of thought did succeed in emerging with wonderful clarity inside my head, but I knew even as it formed that I was in no position to record it, for as soon as I so much picked up my pencil the endless possibilities of language, to which I could once safely abandon myself, became a conglomeration of the most inane phrases. There was not an expression in the sentence but it proved to be a miserable crutch, not a word but it sounded false and hollow. (122-123)

Austerlitz’s failure to write an authentic account of the history of civilization, however, does not remain a problem solely in his writing of history. Instead, “as if some soul-destroying and inexorable force had fastened upon” (123) him, the failure appears to spread, reminding him of his inability to narrate even his own life story.26

It is this threat of collapsing identity, of a non-narrativizable life, that prompts Austerlitz’s search for his parents in Prague. These travels, however, do little to alleviate his need to fill in the missing pieces of his life story. While reconnecting with Vera Ryšanová, his
childhood nursemaid, triggers some memories—he begins, for instance to understand the Czech language—other clues to his former life seem to further obscure his sense of a stable identity. Particularly one photograph of Austerlitz as a child resists integration in the authentic historical context, and inclusion into his own life narrative. Critics of photography like Barthes and Sontag, and beginning with Benjamin himself, have discussed the presumption that photographs can function as “evidence . . . that something exists, or did exist, which is like what’s in the picture” (Sontag 3). However, the photograph of Austerlitz that shows a young boy dressed in a “snow-white costume” (183) of the Rose Queen’s page, destabilizes the notion that the content of the image can offer access to the past how it really was. The white costume literally bears no mark of an authentic history, referring only to the imagined realms of fairy tales. Austerlitz’s identity is foreclosed by the image, even as Vera informs him that “this is you, Jacquot, in February 1939, about six months before you left Prague” (183). Rather than bringing back memories and connecting him with his past, these experiences seem to further alienate Austerlitz: “As far back as I remember . . . I have always felt as if I had no place in reality, as if I were not there at all, and I never had this impression more strongly than on that evening in the Šporkova when the eyes of the Rose Queen’s page looked through me. Even the next day, on my way to Terezín, I could not imagine who or what I was” (185). Instead of helping Austerlitz reconstruct his past, the archive of materials that he relies on appears to have no external referents, and therefore functions to disrupt his sense of a stable identity.27

Austerlitz’s search for his mother in the Theresienstadt film is particularly telling of how much of narrativizing relies on preconceived notions of the past. In Theresienstadt, Austerlitz comes across the film, propaganda material about the camp in which he hopes to find traces of his mother who had been taken to Theresienstadt shortly after Austerlitz’s departure with the
Kindertransport. It is not until repeated viewings of the recording of it in half speed that he believes to have spotted his mother’s face in one of the frames. Yet when he shows the frame to Vera, she ultimately denies that the woman in the film is his mother. Austerlitz’s desire is precisely the need to narrativize her life and to contextualize his own. However, it would also integrate her story into a familiar narrative about the Holocaust. As Marianne Hirsch has argued, because pictures and filmic images can be transmitted and appear without mediation as an artifact from an authentic past, they also produce a self-sustaining narrative about the past. The film in question, Hitler schenkt den Juden eine Stadt, is after all, part of a pre-existing cultural narrative about the camps. Hirsch argues then that the desire to see his mother’s face, is “shaped more and more by affect, need, and desire as time and distance attenuate the links to authenticity and ‘truth.’”28 As Hirsch has argued elsewhere, photographs (and film) provide access to familiar tropes about the past.29 The image of his mother in the film would give Austerlitz not so much access to ‘what really happened,’—Barthes’ “ça à été” (“this has been”)—but instead would offer a narrative context in which his mother’s past, and in turn his own condition, would become readable and communicable.

While the novel suggests that, for Austerlitz, narrative coherence would offer the potential to come to terms with his own past, it simultaneously warns against the consequences of stabilizing the meaning of historical narratives. In fact, early in the novel Austerlitz recounts learning that culturally transmitted images carry their own oversimplified versions of historical reality. André Hilary, Austerlitz’s history teacher at his boarding school, suggests that the study of history can never capture the authentic nature of historical events, with documentary images covering up as much of this reality as they promise to reveal:

All of us, even when we think we have noted every tiny detail, resort to set pieces which have already been staged often enough by others. We try to reproduce the
reality, but the harder we try, the more we find the pictures that make up the stock-in-trade of the spectacle of history forcing themselves upon us: the fallen drummer boy, the infantryman shown in the act of stabbing another . . . . Our concern with history . . . is a concern with preformed images already imprinted on our brains, images at which we keep staring while the truth lies elsewhere, away from it all, somewhere as yet undiscovered. (71-72)

These transmitted images are troubling for Hilary because they affirm and reinforce cultural imaginations about a historical event without, in fact, capturing how it really was. Moreover, images of historical events, such as the “infantryman . . . stabbing another,” evoke emotional responses that, while appearing subjective, are framed immediately by a collective memory. In the case of such widely circulated images, emotional responses are conditioned by cultural mediation in which affective response and cultural narrative appear coextensive, immediately effecting an evaluative exchange of one for the other. Because of this, such narratives are always politically charged. For Sebald, as for Roth, the narrativized past creates a fiction that is shaped by underlying moral frameworks. As Hayden White has argued: “narrativity, certainly in factual storytelling and probably in fictional storytelling as well, is intimately related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralize reality” (18). Sebald, too, attends to the moral dimension contained in narrative by showing how narrative often problematically limits interpretations by strictly adhering to a given set of underlying moral structures.

Sebald thus suggests that narrativized history, and particularly progress narratives, have proven to be a kind of fiction that is no longer available in a post-Holocaust present. What remains then is the archive as fragments of a historical truth. Yet this failure to narrativize also provides an opportunity for “archival” knowledge to create an alternative way of knowing that allows access to a different historical authenticity outside of existing (narrative) frameworks. Austerlitz’s own archive of his comprehensive history of civilization suffers from “archive fever,” and Austerlitz’s failure to connect the fragments in a coherent or truthful way, lead him to
literally destroy the archive: “One evening . . . I gathered up all of my papers, . . . anything with my writing on it, and carried the entire collection out of the house to the far end of the garden, where I threw it on the compost heap” (124-125). The incompleteness of the archive, and the threat of dissolution, a threat only partially alleviated by his findings in Prague, eventually lead Austerlitz to spend time at a mental hospital for a three-week-long “mental absence which . . . paralyzed all thought processes and emotions” (230). Through these stagings Sebald embraces the openness of the archive for the potential it offers, yet he does not deny the threat of destruction inherent in the openness.32

3.4 The Survival of Objects

It is against the problematic linearity of historical narratives and the instability of narrative archives that we must understand Sebald’s emphasis on the potential of archival materiality. In the novel, it is the materiality of objects that provides not only an alternative to historical narrative, but becomes an opportunity to productively engage with the past. The significance of material objects, however, is not immediately discernible. At the Antikos Bazar in Terezín, Austerlitz describes his encountering the various objects, remainders of a past time whose meaning is ultimately elusive. He states:

They were all as timeless as that moment of rescue, perpetuated but forever just occurring, these ornaments, utensils, and mementoes stranded in the Terezín bazaar, objects that for reasons one could never know had outlived their former owners and survived the process of destruction, so that I could now see my own faint shadow image barely perceptible among them. (197)

Like the novel’s narrative style that combines various distinct temporal moments, the objects at the Antikos Bazar, likewise, suggest an overlapping of the past and present. Jens Brockmeier has suggested that these objects, “having lost their stories and, in a sense, their histories . . . have
become a silent assembly of signs of what is absent . . . . Brought together in a strange spatial simultaneity, they seem to be, for a second, for a timeless now” (362). As such, he continues, the objects function as “mementos of [Austerlitz’s] own lost memory” (362). Despite his insistence on the fragmentary nature of the objects at the bazaar, however, Brockmeier forces the objects to signify beyond their materiality. Though irretrievably disconnected from their histories, he suggests, these objects nonetheless testify to narratives that are forever (and lamentably) lost. I would argue, however, that it is precisely the desirability of narrative which Sebald seeks to critique. Instead, I want to suggest that for Sebald objects matter not exclusively as signifiers of the past but rather are important precisely because of their status as objects. Could it be, not that, as Brockmeier argues, these objects “have become a silent assembly of signs of what is absent” (362), but rather that these signifiers have been imbued with such a strong cultural narrative that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to understand them outside of these familiar accounts of the past?

Sebald presents another encounter with the physical materiality of the past in Austerlitz’s visit to the Ghetto Museum. Studying maps and other material evidence of the existence and life of the camp, Austerlitz attempts to make sense of the past of the Theresienstadt ghetto. Like his experience at the Antikos Bazar, Austerlitz is confronted with the materiality of the past:

I understood [beg riff] it all now, yet I did not understand it, for every detail that was revealed to me as I went through the museum from room to room and back again, ignorant as I feared I had been through my own fault, far exceeded my comprehension. I saw pieces of luggage brought to Terezin by the internees from Prague and Pilsen, Würzburg and Vienna, Kufstein and Karlsbad and countless other places; the items such as handbags, belt buckles, clothes brushes, and combs which they had made in the various workshops . . . .” (198-199)

For contemporary readers, this description of the museum is readily recognizable. After all, the images of abandoned luggage, often inscribed with their former owners’ names, are some of the
most emblematic of Holocaust memory. While these objects certainly elicit strong emotional
responses, these reactions must be understood in the context of the cultural narratives about the
Holocaust in which they are framed. In fact, as Marianne Hirsch has argued, contemporary
Holocaust museums seek to harness emotions of identification with Holocaust victims whose
absence is made felt precisely in the absence of these objects’ owners. These emotional
responses, however, as Gary Weissman has convincingly argued, often function merely as an end
in themselves. Because “[a] feeling for horror neither requires nor guarantees much in the way
of historical and moral comprehension of the Holocaust” (Weissman 210), such involvement
rarely goes beyond this initial emotional connection. Moreover, I would argue, it is precisely
because the images of abandoned suitcases, clothing, and personal effects are so famous that
they, as André Hilary puts it, “have been imprinted on our brains,” thus providing a shortcut to
the self-same cultural narratives that first makes these objects readable as representative of the
Holocaust history.

James Young has critiqued this notion of memorialization that centers on the abandoned
artifacts now found so often in Holocaust museums: “What precisely does the sight of
concentration-camp artifacts awaken in viewers? Historical knowledge? A sense of evidence?
Revulsion, grief, pity, fear? . . . But beyond affect, what does our knowledge of these objects—a
bent spoon, children’s shoes, crusty old striped uniforms—have to do with our knowledge of
historical events?” (132-133). Remembering the Holocaust by these objects, Young continues,
elides precisely the “interconnectedness of lives . . . The sum of these dismembered fragments
can never approach the whole of what was lost” (133). Importantly, for Young, the
memorialization of historical objects is never sufficient as the emotional responses they elicit
cannot capture the complexity of that past. In order to attain a sense of the interconnectedness, it seems, such objects need to exceed mere symbolic signification.

In Austerlitz’s experience at the museum, objects become more than mere signifiers, creating a connection based not on narrative and emotion, but affect. There is a sense of ambiguity in Austerlitz’s confession that, “I understood [beg riff] it all now, yet I did not understand it.” This initial doubt speaks not only to the objects’ double-significance as interpretive signs but also, importantly, to their status as physical objects. After all, the German *begreifen* does not only mean ‘to understand’ but also ‘to grasp,’ thus connoting understanding by way of touch. This double-meaning is significant. On the one hand it suggests understanding the artifacts as signifiers, whose stories are either lost or become absorbed within cultural narratives. On the other hand, however, *be-greifen* suggests an understanding of an object that derives from its physical presence. What appears to be at stake here, then, is precisely this dual meaning of understanding in which objects are not reduced to immaterial signifiers but retain their significance as physical objects. Thus, Austerlitz’s (in)ability to understand can be read on both levels. While the objects’ actual narratives are lost, retrieved only as a set of *cultural* narratives about the Holocaust, they do have a resonance as individual objects that affect Austerlitz as he encounters them. While the stories of the “pieces of luggage brought to Terezín by the internees from Prague and Pilsen, Würzburg and Vienna, Kufstein and Karlsbad and countless other places” (198-199) are lost, retrievable only through cultural narratives, their individual past has left its traces on the physical objects themselves.

The objects’ capacity to affect Austerlitz might be best described by what Jane Bennett has termed the “vitality” of objects. For Bennett, vital materiality suggests that things themselves possess the power to act or to be perceived as having a force to bring about change.
She describes this agentic ability using Deleuze’s term “quasi-causal operator” which she describes as “that which by virtue of its particular location in an assemblage and the fortuity of being in the right place at the right time, makes the difference, makes things happen, becomes the decisive force catalyzing an event” (Bennett 9). In this case, the objects at the museum affect Austerlitz because they are physical remainders of a past that no longer exists as such. Likewise, the objects at the Antikos Bazar appear to Austerlitz as objects that have “survived the process of destruction.” Rather than being merely representative of Austerlitz’s lost memory, these objects are survivors in their own right. Seemingly alive, as suggested by the notion of survivor, these objects possess a vital materiality that elevates them from passive matter to quasi agents. It is precisely their status as agents that spans across generational boundaries and which continues to resonate in the present. In Austerlitz, then, objects come to inhabit an important affective space that bridges the gap between the subjectivity of traumatic experience and the inaccessibility of the past for those who have not experienced it.

Importantly, like the narrator’s affective encounter with the past at Breendonk, in which the physical space itself seems to be alive, here too physical objects appear not only as passive reminders of the past, but as taking an active role in the process of an affective encounter with the post-Holocaust present. It is for this reason that we need to take seriously Austerlitz’s suggestion that physical objects or structures have a power to remember that which Austerlitz cannot remember himself. Toward the end of the novel, Austerlitz describes being struck by the material presence of the space when passing through the Pilsen train station:

All I remember of Pilsen, where we stopped for some time, said Austerlitz, is that I went out on the platform to photograph the capital of a cast-iron column which had touched some chord of recognition in me. What made me uneasy at the sight of it, however, was not the question whether the complex form of the capital, now covered with a puce-tinged encrustation, had really impressed itself on my mind when I passed through Pilsen with the children’s transport in the summer of 1939,
but the idea, ridiculous in itself, that this cast-iron column, which with its scaly surface seemed almost to approach the nature of a living being, might remember me and was, if I may so put it, said Austerlitz, a witness to what I could no longer recollect for myself. (221)

What is significant here is that the column at the train station is not overdetermined with meaning. Unlike the station, the column itself matters not as a signifier of Austerlitz’s journey and the deportation of Holocaust victims, but as a physical object. Importantly, Austerlitz’s focus here is not on the way the object influences him, but rather the acknowledgment that the object has a presence that exists apart from human subjectivity or human comprehension. The column is “a living being” in its capacity to affect. It offers knowledge of the past that is not a repressed memory but an affective encounter with its physical materiality. Because the object’s memory exists independently of Austerlitz’s mind, that is, until his encounter with it, it seems to offer insight into the past that extends the realm of the known. It is for this reason that the past doesn’t continue to ‘haunt’ the present as trauma would suggest. The affective encounter produces new knowledge about the past without being tied to any particular historical narrative. In being attuned to objects’ capacity to affect, Austerlitz presents a framework for engaging with historical injury that exists independently of cultural and personal identity.35

For Austerlitz, as for contemporary readers of Austerlitz, Germany’s recent past becomes increasingly inaccessible, though it continues to live on in the present. The novel suggests that even in thinking about how to access, not only the past in general, but specifically how to understand the German past, a complete and unifying narrative cannot be written. If the present is to learn from the past, Sebald suggests, it is through a recognition of past injury. This backward turn that Sebald takes from Benjamin, has to be attuned to all kinds of injuries and must include the destruction of German cities at the end of the war. In fact, Austerlitz notices this absence of a German past when his travels finally take him to Germany: “Looking up at the
facades on both sides of the street, even those of the older buildings which, judging by their
style, must date from the sixteenth or fifteenth century, I was troubled to realize that I could not
see a crooked line anywhere, not at the corners of the houses or on the gables, the window
frames or the sills, nor was there any other trace of past history” (223). Austerlitz’s observation,
of course, echoes Sebald’s argument in “Luftkrieg und Literatur.” However, in the voice of
Austerlitz, it is not so much of a lament about the loss of the cultural memory (as it seems at
times for Sebald) as it is a warning of the potentially dangerous erasure of historical materiality.

It is true that knowing definitively what happened is impossible for the second generation
to which Austerlitz and the narrator both belong. As the narrator’s experience at Breendonk
shows, what can be conveyed is the sense of historical injury as affect. Ruth Leys has warned
that the recent theoretical move from guilt to shame, that is from action to affect, in trauma
theory has begun to replace a framework of political responsibility with individual identity. Such
a move, she argues, is dangerous because it absolves us from political responsibility.36 Sebald,
however, rejects the notion that affective response necessarily signifies a shift from politics to
identity. Affect in Austerlitz is not tied to identity. Austerlitz’s search for an authentic identity
which would link him to Jewish history (or even a familial history) must fail precisely because
he does not share their experience. While trauma remains non-transferable, affect as a response
to historical injury can be shared and mobilized for political action. Austerlitz has been
persuasively read as revealing Sebald’s investment in a literary history rather than as staging a
political intervention. Yet, while Sebald does not overtly prescribe a political agenda, the novel
nevertheless implies certain political directions.37 In Austerlitz, it is crucial to acknowledge the
way the past continues to resonate in the present through the materiality of objects.
Notes

1 For instance, Mary Cosgrove has argued that for Sebald, *Trauer* is the only language appropriate to address this troubling past.

2 Habermas writes: “The juxtaposition of Bitburg and Bergen-Belsen, of SS-graves and the mass graves in a concentration camp took away the singularity of Nazi crimes. And finally the handshake of the veteran generals in the presence of the American president could confirm that we Germans had always been on the right side in the struggle against the Bolshevist enemy” (28).

3 Wiesel stated: “I cannot believe that the President, whom I have seen crying at a Holocaust remembrance ceremony, would visit a German military cemetery and refuse to visit Dachau or any other concentration camp” (qtd. in Weintraub).

4 Huyssen writes: “We all remember the longing for new beginnings at the time of unification. The feuilletons conjured up new beginnings in literature, film, the visual arts, and intellectual life” (138).

5 Sebald, more than any other individual German writer, has been internationally recognized as the “most important” German author of the last generation (Denham 1).

6 See Huyssen 147.

7 For instance, Andreas Huyssen has suggested that we must read *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (*On the Natural History of Destruction*) in the context of new beginnings that accompanied much of the reunification rhetoric of the early 1990s. For Huyssen, the essay must be understood as a reflection on Germany’s present at a new historical stage in the country’s postwar development and as an attempt to reflect on the past fifty years and to speculate about what a reunified Germany might look like (139).

8 Huyssen, in fact, rejects Sebald’s notion that the bombings could not and were not spoken about during the postwar: “Sebald’s repression hypothesis may be the least persuasive aspect of his argument, and it must share the fate of any and all repression hypotheses. Rather than generating silence, as we have learned from Foucault, repression generates discourse. The scarcity of literary texts about the bombing may have to be explained differently, and it certainly contrasts with the fact that there always was a lot of talk about the bombings in postwar Germany. After all, it was that kind of ubiquitous talk, familiar to all who grew up in West Germany in the 1950s, that produced the taboo on discussing the air war among liberals and leftists in the first place. Such discussion was perhaps more prevalent in the private than in the public sphere, but it functioned powerfully in bolstering the war generation’s claims to having been victimized and the attempt to minimize responsibility. Both the Holocaust and the strategic bombings were very much part of the postwar social imaginary in Germany from the very beginning, and neither could be had without the other” (147-148).
Huyssen writes: “Clearly this trauma is made up of various layers—the feeling of the humiliation of total defeat, which is not erased by emphasizing that capitulation was also liberation; the deep guilt feelings about the Holocaust, itself nor a German trauma but rather the trauma of its victims, which as such blocks the desired normalization; the experience of the bombardment of German cities, both of which have been used either to constitute the German as victim in an Aufrechnungsdiskurs, a compensatory discourse of moral equity (look how we suffered), or as a cathartic argument that retributions were justified (serves us right!) with permanent implications for national identity and statehood” (146)

Huyssen writes: “this repetitive dialectic between memory and forgetting has not locked German public culture in the structure of frozen melancholy. Since every repetition differs from the last, there is movement in public memory, a movement not toward resolution or even redemption, but toward acknowledgment and recognition.” (146).

For Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, “[t]rauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect” (Felman and Laub 69).


For a representative reading of Austerlitz as trauma narrative, see Katja Garloff’s “Moments of Symbolic Investiture in W.G. Sebald’s Austerlitz”.

Cathy Caruth reads Freud’s Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Moses and Monotheism precisely the traumatic Jewish history and the survival. She writes: “The belated experience of trauma in Jewish monotheism suggests that history is not only the passing on of a crisis but also the passing on of a survival that can only be possessed within a history larger than any individual or any single generation” (Caruth 71).

For instance, Jens Brockmeier has argued that “[t]here is a pervasive air of melancholy in the books, a sense of “a mind in mourning” (Sontag) . . . . Less mysterious, however, is the basis of this melancholy. Austerlitz’s memory monologues may be melancholic, they may even be atrabilius; but they also are reflexive, analytic, and investigative. They decisively exceed the primarily private and aesthetic tenor of modernist melancholia and Welschmerz. All of Sebald’s protagonists are marked by the burden of a past that is both individual and historical.” (362)
Today’s temporal distance to the Holocaust has been theorized by Marianne Hirsch, who has developed a framework for the status of what she has termed the “second generation” of survivors. Hirsch originally used the term “second generation” to describe specifically the experience of children of Jewish survivors. She has since expanded the meaning of the term to include non-Jews born at the end of the war: “I believe it may be usefully describe other second-generation memories of cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences” (22). Jonathan Long has since used it to describe Sebald’s experience (117-137). Similarly, Susan Suleiman has extended Hirsch’s model by terming “1.5 generation” the child survivors of the Holocaust. For Suleiman, the 1.5 generation is characterized by the irretrievability and inaccessibility of the traumatic memories because, though they were alive to have experienced the persecution of Jews, they were too young to have any conscious memory of it. Though the term 1.5 generation seems to apply to Austerlitz, for him the inaccessibility of conscious memory is exacerbated by the fact that he was not, in fact, living with his parents when their lives were directly impacted by Nazi policies.

In Fantasies of Witnessing, Gary Weissman has argued that for those temporally (and often spatially) removed from the Holocaust perceive the lack of a connection to this history as an absence. He writes: “nonwitnesses are haunted not by the traumatic impact of the Holocaust, but by its absence-by a sense that the Holocaust is not enough with us, the popularity of Holocaust museums and Holocaust movies notwithstanding” (22).

Berlant writes: “Crisis is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what’s overwhelming” (10).

There has been a significant amount of scholarship on the narrative temporality in Austerlitz. Amir Eshel, for instance, has termed Sebald’s narrative style which combines several distinct temporal moments a “poetics of suspension: a poetics that suspends notions of chronology, succession, comprehension, and closure” (Eshel 74).

In her recent book The Queer Art of Failure, Judith Halberstam has suggested that we might read Austerlitz’s sense of a constant present as a useful form of politicized forgetting. She writes that the sense of loss Austerlitz experiences cannot be resolved, “what is lost can never be retrieved, what disappears leaves no trace, and he who leaves may never return.”(85). She argues that for Austerlitz, “[l]earn[ing] to forget” becomes a means of “going on” even as “going on” means never going back” (85). Halberstam here uses the novel as an opportunity to reflect on productive forms of failure and forgetfulness, framing Austerlitz’s perpetual present as a radical and potentially liberating break with the historical and political past. However, while her reading helps avoid the pitfalls of monumentalism, on which trauma theory depends, it also makes the mistake of casting the “past” and “present” as relatively stable and autonomous categories. The past and the present, however, appear here not as stable categories, but rather as relentlessly and often uncomfortably informing each other.

“Aber ich weiß noch, daß mir damals in der Kasematte von Breendonk ein ekelhafter Schmierseifengeruch in die Nase stieg, daß dieser Geruch sich, an einer irren Stelle in meinem Kopf, mit dem mir immer zuwider gewesenen und vom Vater mit Vorliebe gebrauchten Wort
Carolyn Dean has argued that today’s engagement with suffering is often characterized by numbness and lack of empathetic identification. At Breendonk, the narrator’s emotional response is one that, though conditioned by past experience and the violence committed at Breendonk, is uniquely his own. His is not an empathetic identification but an affective connection to historical injury.

Sara Ahmed, for instance, argues that we need to understand feelings as always in circulation between subjects and objects (8).

Benjamin “Concept of History,” Thesis XIII.

For instance, Graham Jackman, following Horkheimer and Adorno in the Dialectic of Enlightenment, argues that, for Sebald, the Holocaust (along with the firebombing of German cities) is representative of the destruction in which the modern need for progress necessarily culminates. He further argues that Sebald can only mourn the loss in a “melanchol[ic] understanding of history [that] permits not even the faint messianic hope which Benjamin sought to maintain in face of the apparent triumph of Fascism” (Jackman 468).

Of course the question of Austerlitz and the fragmentary nature of memory has been thoroughly covered by scholars including Anne Fuchs, Amir Eshel, John Zilcosky, Dora Osborne, Jens Brockmeier, Richard Crownshaw, and Jakob Lothe. What distinguishes my intervention is the way I frame these questions not in terms of identity but rather as affective orientation to past injury.

Jonathan Long has noted the dual nature of the archive that simultaneously affirms and negates a sense of “authentic subjectivity.” For Long, achieving a sense of self is made impossible for Austerlitz for whom the archive functions as an inadequate substitute for authentic memories. Thus, Long writes, “[h]e is . . . driven back to precisely the place he seeks to transcend: the archive (Long 158). While it is true that the materials Austerlitz finds in Prague do not add up to a coherent life narrative, I would argue that Sebald is exploring precisely the desirability of transcendence and of narrative totality.


As Jonathan Long suggests, Austerlitz cannot retrieve access to forgotten memories to write the story of his own life; all he has are disconnected fragments. For Jonathan Long, this is a source of trauma: “it is the very incompleteness of the archive, the fact that... it is ineluctably oriented towards the future, that full closure and disclosure are impossible. Austerlitz’s search for his father is predestined not to be successful... but to lead merely further into the eternal incompleteness of the archive” (163).

Sebald here appears to echo Derrida’s “Archive Fever,” for whom the archive, like Benjamin’s dialectical image, is more than an (incomplete and fragmented) remembrance of the past that cannot be retrieved, but signifies potential that holds a promise for the future. For Derrida, the archive is related to the original affirmation of faith, the chora and thus to the “perhaps” that makes possible the unforeseeable event. For Derrida there is something hopeful in the archive. However, because of the fundamental openness that the archive represents, it holds the potential not only for positive change, but similarly contains the potential of its own destruction. The archive always suffers from, what Derrida calls, archive fever (mal d’archive), the threat of its own dissolution conditioned by its incompleteness, which Derrida relates to the death drive. Like the dialectical image in which time appears to stand still and affect does not instantly translate into narrative, the archive promises the “perhaps,” a potential to interpret the present in new terms.

Like its namesake, the novel builds an archive of isolated conversations, memories, and photographs, bound together, however, by the continuous presence of the narrator who compiles them, in turn, into a narrative (however fragmented). The narrator, too is aware of this quality of the conversations with Austerlitz and notes that the “passing on of his knowledge seemed to become a gradual approach to a kind of historical metaphysic, bringing remembered events back to life” (13). Their conversations then exist in this time-less moment in which Like Benjamin, Sebald appears to understand these clashes not merely as an overlap of past and present in which the past comes alive in the present; it is not ghost of the past which ensures that the past is not forgotten. Rather, it is a way for inherited notions of the past, those understanding the move from past to present as moving on a continual line, to be disrupted. Austerlitz then occupies a curious double position as a kind of narrative whole, which simultaneously attests to its own incompleteness. It is this dual view to history, both as a continuous flow that acknowledges the present as a product of a material past, and as an episodic and dynamic force whose access to this past is always already limited, that helps us identify the political claims at stake in Sebald’s text and to contextualize the position of the text in the contemporary moment. The novel, as well as Austerlitz’s ‘narrative,’ rely on historical facts and affect that is produced as a response to specific, contextualized events; in other words, they are always situated in a particular (though diverse) historical moments. Austerlitz then, both as a novel and main character, could be represented as what Galen Strawson terms “episodic” self-experience. writes that for episodics, “the past can be present or alive in the present without being present or alive as the past. The past can be alive—arguably more genuinely alive—in the present simply in so far as it has helped to shape the way one is in the present, just as musicians’ playing can incorporate and body forth their past practice without being mediated by any explicit memory of it” (5). For Strawson, both episodic and diachronic self-perceptions are viable alternatives, largely dependent on the subject’s own experience. Though this acknowledgment of the simultaneous validity of both perceptions detract from the force of his critique of stable subjectivity that Strawson identifies in
the episodic, the episodic’s acceptance of fragmentation—that recognizes both its continuity without defining itself entirely through it (or in terms of it)—provides a useful way of understanding *Austerlitz*.

33 Gary Weissman has argued that witnessing through imagination becomes a way of “endeavoring to actually feel the horror of what otherwise eludes us” (23). Rather than merely aiding an understanding of the Holocaust then, Weissman suggests, affective identification with its victims allows nonwitnesses to claim their “own place in the hierarchy of suffering” (21). Thus, nonwitnesses to trauma narratives, while on the one hand providing access to knowledge of the Holocaust that escapes rational understanding, represents simultaneously a problematic reduction of its complexities.

34 Bennett writes: “By ‘vitality’ I mean the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (Bennett viii).

35 In *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*, Daniel Lévy and Natan Sznaider have suggested that, in the age of globalization, collective memory of the Holocaust has become a phenomenon that transcends national boundaries. This transcendence, however, is dependent upon the possibility of abstracting the singular event from its social and historical context so that it might function, more broadly, as “cosmopolitanized memory” (13).

36 Leys writes that such a move “displace[s] questions about our moral responsibility for what we do in favor of more ethically neutral or different questions about our personal attributes” (131).

37 Sebald, I would argue, sees the same opportunity for politics as Wendy Brown does in Walter Benjamin. Brown argues that Benjamin’s concept of history provides a way to “discern a ground for political action . . . once history appears to lack a distinct shape and trajectory” (173). What Sebald does not offer, however, is a description of how we can envision this emergent political action.
4. J.M. COETZEE’S DISGRACE AND THE TEMPORALITY OF INJURY

4.1 Introduction

At the center of J.M. Coetzee’s novel *Disgrace* and its engagement with social justice lies the problem of identity and its demands on the law. In scholarship on the novel, much has been said about the law’s inability to adequately address ethical concerns, and the ultimate incommensurability of ethical and legal frameworks. While these readings are attuned to the way that identity and individual experience are shaped by race, gender, and sexual orientation, few have remarked upon the temporal dimension of identity categories and the particular shape these temporalities take in the context of postapartheid South Africa. But in *Disgrace*’s web of social interrelationality, identity categories not only compound and modify each other laterally in the present, but also, importantly, across generational divides. In the novel, the disenfranchisement of black South African men competes with the problem of male sexual violence against women, and collective trauma competes with individual pain. Intertwined with these more explicit conflicts is the extent to which past injury competes with present violence. In what follows, I will argue that attention to the temporality of injury creates a productive opening for rethinking existing social justice paradigms. This chapter begins by reading the novel’s critique of allegorical reading practices in light of recent debates over the limitations of feminist models of intersectionality. Building on these debates, I argue that *Disgrace* offers temporality as a crucial, if easily overlooked, dimension of social justice struggles, presenting injury not as a static object, but as a lived affective orientation towards the present.

While *Disgrace*, unlike many of Coetzee’s earlier novels, does not explicitly demand to be read as allegory, it nonetheless shares some of allegory’s thematic investments. Specifically, the juxtaposition of analogous acts of sexual violence invites an allegorical comparison that
prompts questions about violence, law, and the possibility of justice in the context of postapartheid South Africa. The first instance occurs early in the novel when the novel’s protagonist, David Lurie, initiates a sexual affair with a female student, Melanie Isaacs. The novel leaves the circumstances of the short-lived affair purposely ambiguous, though it suggests that the sexual relationship is not entirely mutual. On one occasion, when Lurie appears unannounced at Melanie’s door, she is “too surprised to resist the intruder who thrusts himself on her” (24). And though Melanie “does not resist,” she does “avert herself” so that “everything done to her might be done, as it were, far away” (25). Likewise, though Lurie believes that his actions were “[n]ot rape, not quite like that,” he recognizes that his advances were nevertheless “undesired to the core” (25). At the official university hearing that follows after Melanie files a report against him, Lurie freely admits to all legal charges. And while the hearing committee accepts Lurie’s admission of guilt on the charge of misconduct, the committee remarks on Lurie’s failure to acknowledge both Melanie’s pain and the way in which his actions fit into “the long history of exploitation” (53). The hearing committee’s demand that Lurie offer a “confession” (51) for his actions in addition to an admission of guilt echoes the methods of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which sought to address, in addition to reparations and financial recompense, the more intangible effects of oppression that occurred during the apartheid regime between 1960 and 1994. Lurie’s refusal to offer an apology, then, suggests an implicit critique of the TRC’s work whose emphasis on ethical concerns seemed to extend its capacities beyond the realm of the law.

Yet if Lurie’s hearing reveals a critique of the TRC, the second half of the novel appears to acknowledge the necessity and validity of such extralegal gestures of reconciliation when Lurie’s own daughter, Lucy, becomes the victim of sexual assault. At the turning point of the
novel, Lucy, with whom Lurie stays after his dismissal from the university, is attacked and raped by three black men on her smallholding in the rural Eastern Cape. It is through the implicit analogy between the attack on Lucy and Lurie’s own sexual transgression that Lurie himself comes to admit the responsibility that he had hitherto refused. Michael Marais, for instance, has argued that “the text constructs a clear parallel between [Lurie’s seduction of his student] and the gang rape of Lurie’s daughter, Lucy” (175). Thus, he continues, “[t]he inference to be drawn from the parallels between the two scenes is that the two acts are identical. Notwithstanding his outrage at Lucy’s violation, Lurie is himself implicated in the relations of power in this society and is thus party to that which he condemns” (175-176). Others, like Gareth Cornwell, have rejected Marais’ claim as “nonsense,” arguing that, unlike in the attack on Lucy, “[t]here is no evidence that Lurie’s dalliance with Melanie Isaacs has permanently damaged her” (319). Cornwell elaborates in a footnote that what distinguishes the two instances of sexual violence is that Melanie never fears the threat of death. 4

Whether or not Melanie has suffered a permanent trauma—which is indiscernible in the novel—is, however, beside the point. After all, in order to quantify the amount of pain Melanie and Lucy experience, these two instances of trauma would have to be comparable in the first place. While it is true that the novel implies an interpretive framework in which the attack on Melanie becomes readable through the subsequent victimization of Lucy, I would argue that it simultaneously resists this kind of conflation which oversimplifies the complex relationship between historical responsibility and the law that the novel seeks to address. It is precisely in its figuration of an implied (but ultimately refused) comparison that the novel actively constructs the present as an impasse. By analogizing Lurie’s actions and the attack on Lucy, Coetzee presents us with a choice: in order to read the two instances as informing each other, we must
either erase the specificities of each situation (as Marais does), or make legible their differences through a process of quantification, establishing a hierarchy of injury (as in Cornwell’s reading). I argue, however, that Coetzee rejects both options, insisting instead that the two cases not only resist analogical thinking but, by thematizing the impossibility of such comparisons, shows that they must fail.

4.2 Beyond Intersectionality

Lurie’s university hearing reveals the complex relationship between competing justice claims. When he refuses to accept responsibility for his actions beyond his guilty plea, Lurie’s reasoning reveals his attempt to rhetorically reduce and even naturalize his transgressions. In fact, Lurie understands his relationship with Melanie entirely outside of social and historical contexts and his transgression as little more than a natural, even romanticized, impulse: “Our paths crossed. Words passed between us, and at that moment something happened which, not being a poet, I will not describe. Suffice it to say that Eros entered. After that I was not the same” (52). Here Lurie, in framing his transgression in the impersonal and apolitical terms of “love,” absolves himself from any social responsibility, and structural inequalities of both race and gender are rendered illegible and go unacknowledged.5

If the power relations between men and women provide the more obvious unspoken background of Lurie’s transgression, then the racial difference, in particular between Lurie and Melanie implicates his actions in the related but different history of oppression in the colonial context. Indeed, Kimberle Crenshaw has argued that the status of women of color as victims of sexual violence has generally been accorded less significance because of long-ingrained
narratives about black female sexuality that date back to early colonial encounters. Crenshaw writes:

The discrediting of Black women’s claims is the consequence of a complex intersection of a gendered sexual system, one that constructs rules appropriate for good and bad women, and a race code that provides images defining the allegedly essential nature of Black women. If these sexual images form even part of the cultural imagery of Black women, then the very representation of a Black female body at least suggests certain narratives that may make Black women’s rape either less believable or less important. These narratives may explain why rapes of Black women are less likely to result in convictions and long prison terms than rapes of white women. (1271)

While we obviously cannot impose Crenshaw’s U.S. based model of intersectionality on theorizations of gender and race relationships in South Africa, it nevertheless gestures at the complex histories of oppression that are elided by a simple comparison between Lucy’s and Melanie’s experience. Indeed, as the hearing committee points out, it is impossible to ignore the social context of Lurie’s actions. The terms of this hearing reveal the difficult relationship between historical injury and contemporary identity categories that underlies the question of responsibility.

Such an argument, of course, resonates strongly with feminist theories of intersectionality. Feminist scholars of color have used intersectionality as a model for negotiating competing and conflicting identity claims, with the ultimate goal of forging productive coalition between marginalized groups. Thus, Cathy Cohen has suggested that identity is rarely linear and that intersectional analysis allows precisely for a more nuanced framework to account for individuals who occupy minority status but “who hold other identities based on class, race and/or gender categories which provide them with membership in and the resources of dominant institutions or groups” (442). Because intersectional analysis reveals the way in which different identity categories modify each other in complex ways, it appears to offer new tools for thinking
through the difficulty in quantifying and comparing situations as different as Melanie’s and Lucy’s. Through the lens of intersectionality, the attack on Lucy cannot simply be seen as an analogy of what happens to Melanie: though the attacks become readable as two instances of violence against women, each situation is implicated in divergent, even conflicting patterns of oppression.

Given the complex interconnections of structural violence and present and historical injury, the novel asks if and how justice can be achieved. While Coetzee does not provide any simple resolutions, *Disgrace* asks these questions in a new way. Here it becomes clear that the way that these injuries are being addressed by the law is inadequate to the complex social and historical relations to which they are asked to respond. While the public apology the hearing committee demands from Lurie certainly helps situate him symbolically in larger structures of oppression, repentance itself, as Lurie points out, “is neither here nor there. Repentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse” (58), and cannot properly belong to the discourse of law.7 Lurie’s refusal to make a public apology, while on the one hand, speaking to his willful ignorance of his racial and gender privilege, simultaneously reveals a critique of the committee’s assumptions about justice. While, on the surface, the committee’s demands speak only to the desire for Lurie to admit responsibility, it becomes clear that an official apology also functions to codify that responsibility. Like “[t]he two names on the page” of the initial report that formally makes them “lovers no more but foes” (40), his apology would establish Lurie as a perpetrator with not only legal but moral responsibility. It is the intangibility of moral responsibility that Lurie appears to resist: “Abuse: he was waiting for the word. Spoken in a voice quivering with righteousness. What does she [Farodia Rassool, the female member of the hearing committee] see, when she looks at him, that keeps her at such a pitch of anger? A shark
among the helpless little fishies? Or does she have another vision: of a great thick-boned male bearing down on a girl-child, a huge hand stifling her cries? How absurd!” (53). Wendy Brown has argued that the solidification of the perpetrator/victim binary is a result of foregrounding injury as marker of identity categories. Reframing justice claims as moral wrongdoing, she suggests, results in “the codification of injury and powerlessness” (27) which occludes political agency. Brown warns that a politics focused on injury,

strives to establish racism, sexism, and homophobia as morally heinous in the law and to prosecute its individual perpetrators . . .[and] delimits a specific site of blame for suffering by constituting sovereign subjects and events as responsible for the ‘injury’ of social subordination. It fixes the identities of the injured and the injuring as social positions, and codifies as well the meanings of their actions against all possibilities of indeterminacy, ambiguity, and struggle for resignification or repositioning. (27)

For Brown, injury framed as identity claim, then, even if it is sensitive to various intersections of identity, reinforces those identity categories by moralizing public response as law. Because the reliance on ethics of injury solidifies the position of the victim, it becomes difficult to address the underlying political inequality.

Thus, while intersectionality offers a useful counterweight to Lurie’s attempts to eschew any cultural and historical responsibility for his actions by calling attention to the multiple structures in which identity operates, intersectionality is also limited in its ability to effect political change. Rather than functioning itself as a pathway to social equality and justice, Brown argues, the naming of identities inherent in the process of intersectional critique, in fact, stabilizes and replicates the patterns of victimization. In this light, Lurie’s public apology, if given, though it would function as an acknowledgment of structures of oppression by establishing Lurie as oppressor and Melanie as oppressed, would still fall short of adequately addressing either the underlying structural inequalities or the problem of historical injury.
The reliance on the stability of identity that Brown critiques has been challenged by several postcolonial critics as well.\(^8\) Jasbir Puar has argued that the framework of intersectionality is too limited to address the complexities of past and present oppressions precisely because, despite its challenges to identity categories, intersectionality still relies on the concept of subjectivity. For Puar, intersectionality, while it attempts to make readable the way that different identities modify each other, still relies on “taking imbricated identities apart one by one to see how they influence each other” (212), which ultimately “betrays the founding impulse of intersectionality” (212). Thus, intersectionality, even as it attempts to make visible the ways in which identities modify each other, can only ever read intersectional identity as the sum of individual claims rather than as an organic whole. Moreover, Puar emphasizes the problematic stability of identity on which the intersectional model relies. She argues that

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\text{[i]ntersectionality demands the knowing, naming, and thus stabilizing of identity across space and time, relying on the logic of equivalence and analogy between various axes of identity and generating narratives of progress that deny the fictive and performative aspects of identification: you become an identity, yes, but also timelessness works to consolidate the fiction of a seamless stable identity in every space. (Puar 212)}
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Critical for Puar is the fact that intersectional identity appears fixed, that is, identity categories are understood as essentially equivalent regardless of their social and historical contexts. Despite its ambitions, intersectionality, then, can only ever capture identity as a complicated—but ultimately stable—“freezing-frame.”\(^9\) Thus, while intersectionality might seem to offer a way out of the knot of competing identity claims the novel presents, I would argue that it is precisely the intersectional impulse to compound stable identities that remain unchanged across time that Coetzee critiques.

If the novel challenges an analogous reading of the two instances of sexual violence against women by problematizing each character’s membership in multiple, often conflicting,
identity categories, the question of time—both personal and historical—further complicates the already complex social relations. Not only is Lucy a white woman and a lesbian, she is also a white person in rural South Africa, whose house “dat[ing] from the time of large families, of guests by the wagonful” (60), ties her directly to South African colonial history. Lurie makes this temporality explicit when he attempts to console his daughter after the attack by suggesting that responsibility for the three men’s actions lies also in South Africa’s social context: “It was history speaking through them,” he reflects, “[a] history of wrong” (156). Critiques of the novel have emphasized the way in which Coetzee relies on a stereotype of black masculinity, describing the rapists as men who “do rape” (158). And, indeed, Lurie does not do much to dispel the notion that he himself uncritically relies on such tropes. Understanding the attack on Lucy merely as retribution for colonial violence, in addition to relying on the stereotype of African men as rapists, furthermore naturalizes rape as a way in which colonial power manifests itself. The assumption that the attack functions as revenge for colonial injury implies that Lucy’s body can be reduced to a symbolic representation of (white) dominant power and that black male sexual violence against white women can be simply recast as the means by which racial and cultural power can be reclaimed. Rather than being sensitive to the ways in which these identity categories modify each other, Lurie frames racial and sexual violence as similar but opposite kinds of oppression. Lurie’s belief that one kind of violence could be understood as making up for the other further exposes the problematic logic that only white women are legitimate victims of sexual violence, while only black men suffer racial oppression. Reading the two scenes of sexual violence as mirror images of one another, the novel seems to suggest, is to mask or deny the history of discursive construction and embodied experience that these often competing identity claims occupy.
Accordingly, what interests me about Lurie’s reflection that “[i]t was history speaking through them” (156) is not that it reinforces stereotypes about black masculinity, but rather the fact that it points to the continued relevance of past injury in the present. While intersectionality is attuned to multiple histories of oppression, its focus is on an implied stability of identity categories across time; its turn to the past aims to uncover repeating patterns of domination. What intersectionality tends to miss, then, is a critique that is sensitive to the way in which different and conflicting temporalities overlap and shape each other. While Lucy represents the continuation of a certain line of white colonists of the past, that history, due to its temporal distance, does not inform her immediate identity. Similarly, the three men are linked to this history of colonial oppression to which they, likewise, cannot claim firsthand experiential connection—though they are dealing with its intangible effects.

4.3 Bodies in Motion

For some critics, the impossibility of binding historical injury to identity results in a dismissal of all claims to historical injury in the present. For instance, Walter Benn Michaels has suggested that “the obvious objection to thinking of history as a kind of memory is that things we are said to remember are things that we did or experienced, whereas things that are said to belong to our history tend to be things that were neither done nor experienced by us” (135). Because memory cannot extend outside of individual experience, Michaels concludes that in terms of present justice, “no one’s history need be taken into account” as “the question of past injustice has no bearing on the question of present justice” (166). It is certainly problematic to want to hold accountable individuals in the present for injuries of the past solely on the basis of their membership in certain identity categories—or, conversely, to grant benefits to those whose
identities align them with the victims of such injury. Culturally, however, as the committee’s reaction—and by extension the work of the TRC—shows, the memory of historical injury is not easily forgotten. Critiques such as Michaels’ notwithstanding, in places like South Africa discourses that frame historical injury in terms of the struggle of competing identities are difficult to dismiss.

Since identity categories can only successfully name identities in the present, what is needed is a more flexible framework that can account for the temporal dimension of embodied experience. Recently, theorists of affect have begun to articulate alternatives for how to conceive of embodied experience, which, I argue, provide a more productive framework for negotiating the novel’s racial, gendered and temporal tensions. Brian Massumi, for instance, has suggested that existing models of identity or of the “discursive” body, lack an account of the body’s ability to sense and to move (2). Massumi argues that this movement is crucial to understanding lived experience. In the “positional model” (Massumi’s term for intersectional approaches to identity), Massumi observes that “[t]here is ‘displacement,’ but no transformation; it is as if the body simply leaps from one definition to the next” (3). Because the “positional model’s definitional framework is punctual, it simply can’t attribute a reality to the interval whose crossing is a continuity (or nothing). The space of the crossing, the gaps between positions on the grid, falls into a theoretical no-body’s land” (3-4). Keeping in mind Massumi’s metaphor of the body-in-movement, I would argue that it is precisely in its thematicization of the “gaps between positions” that Disgrace presents an alternative to identitarian and intersectional frameworks for making sense of historical injury.

Lurie is very much invested, we learn early on in the novel, in a positional model of lived reality. For instance, the novel introduces Lurie as a man who “has, to his mind, solved the
problem of sex rather well” (1), and more than once the text refers to Lurie as a man who is “too old” (2) to change and quite set in his ways. Lurie’s way of reading, which prioritizes the moments of identity rather than the movements of the body, becomes clear early on. On the first evening that he invites Melanie to his house, he asks her to watch a video-recorded dance performance with him:

Sitting side by side they watch. Two dancers on a bare stage move through their steps. Recorded by a stroboscopic camera, their images, ghosts of their movements, fan out behind them like wingbeats. It is a film he first saw a quarter of a century ago but is still captivated by: the instant of the present and the past of that instant, evanescent, caught in the same space. He wills the girl to be captivated too. But he senses she is not. (14-15)

The stroboscopic camera appears to make visible the movements of the dancers on screen. Importantly, Lurie is particularly fascinated by the way that the “ghosting” effect appears to capture both “the present and the past” in one moment, allowing him to see the bodies’ movements.¹¹

All film, of course, can be understood as a visual trick that depends on the brain’s insistence on seeing continuous movement where there is none; however, the stroboscopic camera makes visible this effect by capturing a continuous motion as a series of still images and subsequently overlapping and repeating frames. Paradoxically, while the accumulation of frames makes the changes between stills more visible, it is the body’s movement itself that is elided. Movement, as Massumi argues, holds a potential for variation that is integral to experience: “When a body is in motion, it does not coincide with itself. It coincides with its own transition: its own variation. The range of variations it can be implicated in is not present in any given moment, much less in any position it passes through. In motion, a body is in an immediate, unfolding relation to its own variation” (4). It is this capacity for variation that is lost entirely in the film. The visual effect can only be produced by overlapping a still picture with a later one, a
doubling which makes it appear as though the path of the action is always already prescribed. The ghosting bodies that thus appear, unlike the original body, can only always be an exact repetition of the original. What is lost here in the ghosting images is the potential of the body to become. Like the “cultural freeze-frame” which Puar identifies as the liability of identity-based models, the stroboscopic effect creates a static archive of the body; movement is frozen in its potential to become.

Thus, Lurie’s fascination with the film reveals that he takes seriously the notion that truth is revealed in the tracking of a past instant to a present one. His belief that the body can be made readable through the snapshots that freeze its poses, however, is exposed throughout the novel as a convenient fiction. This is, of course, nowhere more apparent than in the historical and cultural framing of the attack on Lucy, which refuses this kind of static snapshot view of intersecting identities, even as it appears to invite it. It is for this reason that Lurie’s understanding of Lucy’s reaction to the crimes vacillates between attempts to ascribe her pain to identity, wondering if “[r]aping a lesbian [is] worse than raping a virgin” (105), and trying to give meaning to her insistence to stay on the land (“Is it some form of private salvation you are trying to work out? Do you hope you can expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present?” (112)). In each of those moments, however, these identity categories are never sufficient: Lucy’s sexual orientation does not suffice to understand her trauma, and the notion of “private salvation” cannot capture her motivations for coping with it. This, I would argue, is because the positions on the grid cannot account for historical injury.

Historical injury does not belong to the readable body in the same way as do other identity categories such as race, gender and sexual orientation—in a freeze-frame view, historical injury is invisible. In order to see how historical injury is connected to the body, it is helpful
again to turn to Massumi’s notion of the body’s movement. Here Massumi argues that the positional model, or intersectionality, reduces the experience of identity to namable categories. What is perceived as identity, Massumi argues, is in fact better described as an ongoing affective experience, or what he, following Deleuze calls “intensities,” which reside both inside and outside the body. Massumi writes, and I quote at length:

Gender, race, and sexual orientation also emerge and back-form their reality. Passage precedes construction. But construction does effectively back-form its reality. Grids happen. So social and cultural determinations feed back into the process from which they arose. Indeterminacy and determination, change and freeze-framing, go together. They are inseparable and always actually coincide while remaining disjunctive in their modes of reality. To say that passage and indeterminacy ‘come first’ or ‘are primary’ is more a statement of ontological priority than the assertion of a time sequence. They have ontological privilege in the sense that they constitute the field of the emergence, while positionings are what emerge. The trick is to express that priority in a way that respects the inseparability and contemporaneousness of the disjunct dimensions: their ontogenetic difference (8).

For Massumi, identity emerges only as an effect of this process as retrospective ordering. What’s important here is that for Massumi there cannot be “any categorical separation between the social and the presocial, between culture and some kind of ‘raw’ nature of experience” (9). Rather, in the process of ontogenesis, “[t]he field of emergence is not presocial. It is open-endedly social. It is social in a manner ‘prior to’ the separating out of individuals and the identifiable groupings that they end up boxing themselves into” (9). Because Massumi locates the effect of culture as both external and as integral to the process of emergence, I would argue that ontogenesis not only describes the process of what is perceived as identity, but also functions as the place of emergence of what I have called historical injury. In this way, historical injury belongs to the body as shaping lived experience, but it is not reducible to it.

This framework then helps to read the problem of responsibility in Lurie’s hearing. What the committee understands and demands Lurie to acknowledge is the significance of the social
and historical context of his affair with Melanie. Even though historical injury cannot be reduced to (intersectional) identities, it exists as embodied experience. Following Massumi’s notion of ontogenesis, this problem becomes readable: historical injury, as a cultural force, like those of race, gender and orientation, belongs to the body in that it determines its field of emergence.\textsuperscript{12} The difference is that while the freeze-framing preserves (in a static way) these categories of identity, historical injury can only always be perceived as affective orientation. Because it cannot be tied to any other category in a definitive way, historical injury always remains invisible to such frameworks.

Sara Ahmed has articulated how we might understand the materiality of lived experience not only as subject position but as orientation. Orientation, as direction, emphasizes precisely the movement between subject and object in which both mutually give rise to the other. The past functions as a way of providing a direction which affects bodies in different ways. Ahmed, speaking specifically to the way that colonial past belongs to the racialized body, writes:

\begin{quote}
   bodies are shaped by histories of colonialism . . . . Bodies remember such histories, even when we forget them. Such histories, we might say, surface on the body, or even shape how bodies surface . . . . In a way, then, race does become a social as well as a bodily given, or what we receive from others as an inheritance of this history. (111)
\end{quote}

Importantly, Ahmed speaks of race not as identity category or subject position, but rather as bodies which share a similar orientation. Orientation, while acknowledging the materiality of race, understands it as a dynamic (rather than stable) embodied reality.\textsuperscript{13} In this way, even though orientation appears as a given directionality of movement, it is never coextensive with identity; movement always exceeds such boundedness.

Moreover, it is important to distinguish historical injury (as affective relation to the past) from traumatic memory. Traumatic memory, as subjective experience, is tied to individual
subjectivity and thus must remain inaccessible to subsequent generations. Historical injury as intensity, by contrast, occupies a space that exists within movement. As movement, historical injury exceeds the boundaries of subjectivity—simultaneously belonging to the body, but extending beyond it. While traumatic experience can only ever be singular and personal, historical injury, precisely because it exists in the relation between positions, can never be limited by the body. Thus, historical injury, as a relation to the past, which belongs to the field of emergence, rather than belonging to subjects as such, expresses itself as a relational orientation towards the present. Subjectivity alone then is not enough to address historical injury. Because one’s relationship to the past is available only in-between positions, historical injury is better understood as affective orientation. In this view then it is not necessary, as Michaels argues, to redefine historical memory as cultural trauma in order to give historical injury meaning in the present. Rather, the past (and particularly historical injury) gives rise to the body’s affective orientation to the present.

It is in the relationship in between bodies that diverging orientations become apparent. As orientation affects that which can come into sight, Ahmed argues, it makes possible “collective direction,” the “ways in which nations or other imagined communities might be ‘going in a certain direction,’ or facing the same way, such that only some things ‘get our attention’” (15). Facing the same way, Ahmed argues, first gives rise to what Benedict Anderson calls “imagined communities.” For Massumi, this affective relation, creates not only a sense of community, but provides a connection to the world. When these directions do not coincide, the result is a disconnect in an affective relation to an object. When Lurie shows Melanie the video of the dance performance, he desires her to share in his relation to it. Yet, while he is “captivated” by it and “wills the girl to be captivated too,” he “senses she is not” (15) and this connection fails to
be made. It is in these moments that the novel shows the disjunction between different bodies’ orientations. These moments of recognition, though desired, are continually thwarted in *Disgrace*.

### 4.4 Conclusion

It is through the framework of affect that we must understand the ending of the novel, which poses a challenge for many critics. Late in the novel, Lucy reveals to Lurie that she is pregnant as a result of the attack. Against her father’s advice, Lucy insists not only on keeping the baby but on staying in her house, even though she believes that “[t]hey will come back for [her]” (158). In addition, Lucy comes to an agreement with Petrus that gives him the right to most of her land in exchange for offering her his protection as his second wife. Though Lucy insists on keeping her house, she knows that she will “start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity . . . like a dog” (205). This ending is problematic because it does not offer any satisfying resolution to the political and social problems the novel sets up. Though we can read Lucy’s decision to raise her baby as a gesture of reconciliation in which the biracial child becomes the embodiment of the coming together of black and white South Africans, this notion of reconciliation does not square with the violence by which this new future is inaugurated. Likewise, while the transfer of the land appears to restore a kind of originary ownership, it also enforces a set of traditional patriarchal gender norms in which Lucy’s independence is suddenly reduced to the role of a dependent when she marries Petrus to become part of “his establishment” (203). These readings, however, present us with a similar dichotomy as the figures I just discussed; Coetzee appears to
offer a false choice, while suggesting that there is something unseen in the gaps opened up by these conventional readings.

As with allegorical repetition that appears to promise clarity only to supplant it, Coetzee’s writing style challenges any surety the text appears to offer. In fact, Derek Attridge has suggested that Coetzee’s self-reflexiveness consistently undermines any authoritative guidance. At several points, the novel self-consciously alludes to the limitations of language to articulate lived experience. Though the novel is written with a third-person narrator, the free indirect style allows Lurie’s point of view to dominate the narrative. The effect is that Lurie’s thoughts, as subjective and possibly mistaken perceptions, appear to have the force of objective narrative. For instance, at the Isaacs’ house, when Lurie comes to apologize for his transgression, he meets Melanie’s younger sister Desiree, and Coetzee provides us with the following description: “‘Hello,’ she murmurs; and he thinks, My God, my God! As for her, she cannot hide from him what is passing through her mind: So this is the man my sister has been naked with! So this is the man she has done it with! This old man!” (169). Of course, this description is deceptive because Desiree’s thoughts here are not hers but Lurie’s. Free indirect style, even as it appears to provide insight, in fact, obscures Desiree’s thoughts from view entirely in favor of the dominant position. The novel is conscious of the limitations of language, which does not allow access to the affective life of others.

The novel is particularly interested in the unknowability of Lucy’s motivations. Late in the novel, Lucy confronts her father for his involvement in her life:

I can’t run my life according to whether or not you like what I do. Not any more. You behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main character, I am a minor character who doesn’t make an appearance until halfway through. Well, contrary to what you think, people are not divided into major and minor. I am not minor. I have a life of my own, just as important to me as yours is to you, and in my life I am the one who makes the decisions. (198)
This moment of self-reflexivity is important for two reasons: on the one hand it alludes to the impossibility of accessing others’ thoughts, revealing precisely the deceptive nature of free indirect style. On the other hand, this foregrounding of novelistic conventions also firmly rejects the hope that the reader may have privileged access to such knowledge. After all, Lucy is a “minor character who doesn’t make an appearance until halfway through” Coetzee’s novel, and as such, would seem to be readable within a given interpretive framework. However, by calling attention to the way she has been relegated to a “minor character,” Lucy effectively denies the possibility that alterity could be made accessible to us through a novelistic device.

If Lucy’s lived affective reality is ultimately unknowable, then her decision to accept Petrus’ protection must also be understood as outside of conventional interpretive frameworks. As I have discussed above, Lucy’s decision to stay is problematic within the discourses of both reconciliation and self-determination, yet in its denial of stable frameworks, the novel suggests that Lucy’s motivation must be read as residing, as lived affective orientation to the present, outside of these discourses. Affect, as movement, is precisely that which resists readability and as such, it provides a third alternative to the binary the novel appears to set up. It is the affective orientation which is attuned to historical injury, and in which it finds its expression. Whether or not Lucy’s decision proves beneficial for her or provides a step in the process of reconciliation is ultimately indeterminable. What matters for Coetzee, I would argue, is not the outcome, but the process which acknowledges movement’s capacity for variation. Lucy’s decision is precisely a singular act which is not reducible to existing interpretive frameworks.16

What Disgrace offers is not a promise of the knowledge of alterity or of compassionate identification with the other.17 Instead the impossibility of reading one through the other creates a shift in affective relation. By the end of the novel Lurie’s opera, originally conceived as
focusing on the life of Lord Byron, now dramatizes instead the life of Byron’s mistress, Teresa. This shift in perspective that requires Lurie to imagine himself as occupying the subject position of a middle-aged Teresa, seems to suggest the possibility of sympathetic identification:  

Six months ago he had thought his own ghostly place in Byron in Italy would be somewhere between Teresa’s and Byron’s: between a yearning to prolong the summer of the passionate body and a reluctant recall from the long sleep of oblivion. But he was wrong. It is not the erotic that is calling to him after all, nor the elegiac, but the comic. He is in the opera neither as Teresa nor as Byron nor even as some blending of the two: he is held in the music itself, in the flat, tinny slap of the banjo strings, the voice that strains to soar away from the ludicrous instrument but is continually reined back in, like a fish on a line. ’ ” (184-185)  

Marianne DeKoven understands this scene as evidence that Lurie has “succeeded in becoming, through writing his opera,” the “middle aged woman” he depicts. But while Lurie may be willing to “renounce” his privileged position, imagination alone does not allow him to inhabit a position of alterity. Lurie is neither guilty nor absolved because, despite the novel’s title, the problem of historical injury cannot be resolved though the usual narrative arc of disgrace and redemption. Rather, like the “flat tinny slap of the banjo strings” that “continually rein” the “voice” “back in like a fish on a line,” Lurie is sutured to his own historical present.  

Rather than confirming already held beliefs through analogy, in what Eve Sedgwick might call “paranoid” reading, the novel lays bare this problematic approach. Derek Attridge has proposed that a “literal” reading of Coetzee’s work “would refrain from interpretation, and would seek rather to do justice to the work’s singularity and inventiveness by the creation of a text of equal singularity and inventiveness” (36). This “event” of reading would draw on the reader’s experience as part of the act of creating the text. The singularity of literature then makes itself felt as “a strangeness, a newness, a singularity, an inventiveness, an alterity in what I read” (Attridge 40). Only when one does not foreclose this experience of strangeness by imposing narrative coherence, then, Attridge argues, “one might say, [I can] live the text that I read” (40).
While I agree with Attridge on the potential of a “literal” reading of Coetzee’s work, I would argue that one ought not to dismiss the significance of the way in which his novels prompt comparative thinking—thus carving out a middle ground between the analogical and the literal. After all, it is precisely in the novel’s disruption of such meaning-making, or what Deleuze might call an ‘encounter,’ that these new orientations become possible. For Deleuze, an encounter is an affective perception that gives rise to new patterns of thought. If historical injury belongs to the body as affective orientation, then a new framework for accounting for historical injury in the present can likewise best be achieved through affect. It is for this reason that identification with the other must fail because it presumes a stable subjectivity that can be inhabited or approximated through identification. Instead, identity reframed as movement of affective orientation is flexible. It is through affective reorientation that new things can come into view. At the same time, as new objects come into view, a change of intensity affects the degree to which specific historical injuries become articulated. Thus, Disgrace does not present a solution to the problem of the role of historical injury in political and legal contexts but offers a new perspective from which to begin these conversations.
Disgrace, unlike many of Coetzee’s earlier novels such as Waiting for the Barbarians or Life and Times of Michael K, is not immediately identifiable as drawing on the conventions of allegory. However, I would argue that these earlier texts establish Coetzee’s suspicions of allegorical reading practices, which he further explores in Disgrace. Life and Times of Michael K is exemplary of Coetzee’s early allegories. Though the novel, with the exception of part two, is told from Michael K’s point of view, K remains an enigmatic character, whose motivations are not always readily apparent. Because K’s silence resists integration into a coherent narrative meaning, allegorical meaning-making can take on a myriad of interpretive approaches. As Nadine Gordimer has pointed out, K represents not only “a real human being experiencing an individual body,” but “for some of us he will be the whole black people of South Africa . . . for some he will be the inmate of Auschwitz or Stalin’s camps. Others will see the split lip and strangulated speech as the distortion of personality that South African race laws have effected” (Gordimer). The novel’s allegorical openness allows for all of these interpretive approaches, and it is precisely the seemingly arbitrary privileging of one reading over another that the novel seeks to investigate.

Through metanarrative, the novel investigates what it means to write the life and times of Michael K, whose silence resists coherent meaning making. After all, it is the medical officer in charge of K while he is detained in the “rehabilitation camp” who after unsuccessfully pressing K to narrate his story, ultimately—“mak[ing] something up for the report” (141)—supplies it himself. Yet even when, a bit later, the medical officer recognizes K, in his withdrawnness, as emblematic of the meaninglessness of the ongoing civil war, in which both parties have seemingly forgotten what they are fighting for, the novel immediately refutes this interpretation by pointing to its own constructedness of the act of allegorical interpretation:

I am the only one who sees you for the original soul you are. I am the only one who cares for you. I alone see you as neither a soft case for a soft camp nor a hard case for a hard camp but a human soul above and beneath classification, a soul blessedly untouched by doctrine, untouched by history, a soul stirring its wings within that stiff sarcophagus, murmuring behind a clownish mask. You are precious, Michaels, in your way; you are the last of your kind, a creature left over from an earlier age, like the coelacanth or the last man to speak Yaqui. We have all tumbled over the lip into the cauldron of history; only you, following your idiot light, biding your time in an orphanage . . ., evading the peace and the war . . . observing the seasons, no more trying to change the course of history than a grain of sand does. (151-152)

The work of reading K allegorically, which the medical officer establishes in the quite lengthy second part of the novel on K, seems to be undone at the very end of the section in which the medical officer imagines himself “run[ning] after [K], ploughing as if through water through the thick grey sand, dodging the branches, calling out: ‘Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know that word. It was an allegory—speaking at the highest level—of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it” (166). In the mouth of the medical officer, the allegorical reading of K the reader has been asked to accept as revealing a hidden meaning, now literally gets “called out” as the literary

Notes

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device that it is. Rather than leading to ‘truth’ outside of the text, the novel’s self-referentiality exposes the artifice of allegorical meaning-making.

For Coetzee, allegory never affords the promise of significance and claim to ‘truth’ that it promises to hold. Instead, allegory functions as precisely the device that reveals the slippages of language that underlie truth claims. After all, the medical officer’s ‘revelation’ is exposed here as a mere substitution of his own beliefs for the ‘truth.’ Yet, allegory, the novel seems to argue, always relies on this problematic substitution. In “The Rhetoric of Temporality” Paul de Man has explored the question of the relationship between signs at work in the practice of allegory. Arguing that both allegory and symbol must be understood as signs whose relationship to their signified is effectively severed, de Man argues that allegory alone does not deny this disconnect. Because allegory by its very definition relies on a “sign refer[ring] to another sign that precedes it” (207), the temporal difference between signs always serves as a reminder that allegory deals only in language itself, while the “reference to their respective meanings has become of secondary importance” (207). Allegory, de Man writes, “establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference. In so doing, it prevents the self from an illusory identification with the non-self, which is now fully, though painfully, recognized as a non-self.” (207). In other words, for de Man, because it acknowledges the presence of the temporal difference between signs, far from pretending to “ultimately lead[…] to a total, single, and universal meaning” (188), allegory makes visible this gap. It is this gap that the medical officer’s proclamation of K as allegory reveals, and it is this gap, whose constructedness Disgrace further explores.

While Disgrace is not readable as allegory in the same way as Coetzee’s earlier novels. I would argue that Disgrace nonetheless shares some of these earlier novels’ investments in bringing allegorical meaning making to the fore. All of Coetzee’s allegories, while employing allegorical conventions, simultaneously thematize what it means to find meaning beyond the literal. As Dominic Head has argued, in Coetzee’s work there is a “coinciding use and interrogation of . . . [the] procedures” (qtd. in Attridge, Ethics 35) of allegory. As I have suggested above, the juxtaposition of analogous acts of sexual violence in Disgrace invite an allegorical comparison, which lead Gareth Cornwell to suggest that “all Coetzee’s fictions, although . . . adequately ‘embedded in life,’ are essentially allegorical rather than mimetic plots” (320). Though I agree with Cornwell in identifying Disgrace as an allegorical text, I would reject his claim that Coetzee, while critical of allegory, ultimately gives in to allegorical reading practices. After all, as the medical officer’s allegorical reading reveals, his interpretation is reflective only of his own pre-existing beliefs which he substitutes for allegorical ‘truth.’ In fact, Derek Attridge warns that we ought to resist allegorical reading precisely because Coetzee expose allegories as “deal[ing] with the already known,” (64) rather than as able to produce new knowledge.

2 For readings of Disgrace as a response to the TRC see Jacqueline Rose’s “Apathy and Accountability: South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission”; Rebecca Saunders’ “Disgrace in the Time of a Truth Commission.”

3 See Poyner.

4 Cornwell argues that “[t]he difference is summed up succinctly in Lurie’s thoughts on Byron’s many conquests, some of which, he surmises, amounted to little more than rape: ‘But none surely had cause to fear that the session would end with her throat being cut’ (160)” (321).
See Elizabeth Anker for an analysis of the way Coetzee negotiates contradictory meanings of ‘desire’ in *Disgrace* arguing that desire is “tied simultaneously to the darker, corrosive aspects of human nature . . . and also to the human capacity for engaged and ethical affirmation” (248).

See Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, Kimberle Crenshaw.

Similarly, while Lurie demands legal redress for what happened to Lucy, Petrus, Lucy’s hired help and neighbor (and as the reader later learns, related to one of the men involved in the attacks) suggests that “the insurance will give you a new car” (137). Petrus’ response here makes apparent the fundamental problem of justice the novel sets up: of all the crimes committed during the attack, the law, with its focus on redress, can address adequately only the theft of Lurie’s car in which the attackers left the scene of the crime.

See Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*.

Puar uses Brian Massumi’s term here.

See McDonald for an overview of the reception of *Disgrace* in South Africa, and in particular the African National Committee’s (ANC) claims that the novel confirms the continued prevalence of white racism in the South African media.

For Lurie, a “disciple of . . . Wordsworth” (116), this idea seems to echo Wordsworth’s experience at Tintern Abbey where past and present experience seem to overlap in the same moment. Yet, in addition to the filmic effects, the act of watching the film for Lurie appears to reflect this doubling of past and present on yet another level. Like Wordsworth remembering his first visit to Tintern Abbey, Lurie, too, watching the film with Melanie, is suddenly reminded of the first time he saw it “a quarter century ago.” For Wordsworth of course, experience of the past returning in the present is an opportunity to reflect on the change of the self in the course of time, and the video recording appears to have a similar effect on Lurie.

See Massumi 15.

Ahmed writes: “The ‘matter’ of race is very much about embodied reality; seeing oneself or being seen as white or black or mixed does affect what one ‘can do,’ or even where one can go, which can be redescribed in terms of what is and what is not within reach” (112).

Massumi writes: “The object does not figure ‘in itself.’ It figures differentially, as approached from disjunct perspectives (skepticism and the desire to convince) linked in a moving-toward. The object figures as bringing those subjective poles of the movement into phase. Their difference of approach is resolved in the collective ability to point and say, ‘That’s it!’ The demonstrative exclamation marks the operative inclusion of the object in the movement, as a trigger of its elements’ entering into phase. The ‘object’ is an exclamation point to joint experience. . . The unity lasts as long as its demonstrative performance. It is an event: a rolling
of subjective and objective elements into a mutual participation co-defining the same dynamic. (Semblance and Event 30)

15 Attridge writes: “[W]e remain conscious of these narrating figures as fictional characters, as selves mediated by language which has not forgotten its mediating role, a language with a density and irreducibility which signals its rhetorical shaping, its intertextual affiliations, its saturatedness with cultural meanings. For both of these reasons, we can never remove the aura of something like irony that plays about these representations of human individuals.” (Ethics 7)

16 Derek Attridge has argued that literary fiction occupies a unique position in that it can accommodate indeterminacy without reducing singularity to frameworks of the already known.

17 Jacqueline Rose, for instance, has stressed identification as necessary response to historic injustice.

18 For Lurie, a man dealing in absolutes, the inaccessibility that affect presents to language is perhaps the most difficult realization. de Man links irony to the image of a fall in which the subject becomes aware of the temporal deceptions inherent in language. He writes: “At the moment that . . . the language-determined man laughs at himself falling, he is laughing at a mistaken, mystified assumption he was making about himself. . . . The Fall, in the literal as well as the theological sense, reminds him of the purely instrumental, reified character of his relationship to nature” (214). Lurie does fall as he comes to realize his own implications in patterns of oppression. As de Man adds, “the man who has fallen is somewhat wiser than the fool who walks around oblivious to the crack in the pavement about to trip him up” (214), and it is clear that Lurie has gained a new perspective. However, a new perspective is not the same thing as actually having access to the affective (or lived) reality of others.

19 Though Lurie’s act of sympathetic identification may at times seem to approximate a shared affective orientation, true alterity ultimately remains inaccessible to him. Lurie’s identification with the dogs in Bev’s clinic, and particularly his devotion to the corpses of the dogs that have been put to death there, provides the limit case for the possibility of such identification. See Attridge “Age.”

20 See Sedgwick 126.

21 Deleuze terms such a disruptive affective perception an “encounter.” He writes: “Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter. What is encountered may be Socrates, a temple or a demon. It may be grasped in a range of affective tones: wonder, love, hatred, suffering. In whichever tone, its primary characteristic is that it can only be sensed. In this sense it is opposed to recognition. In recognition, the sensible is not all that which can only be sensed, but that which bears directly upon the senses in an object which can be recalled, imagined or conceived. . . . The object of encounter, on the other hand, really gives rise to sensibility with regard to a given sense. . . . It is not a quality but a sign. It is not a sensible being but the being of the sensible. It is not the given but that by which the given is given” (Deleuze 139-140).
5. CONCLUSION

In this project, I have attempted to sketch out an affective reading practice that challenges the way historical injury has been traditionally articulated. Paying close attention to the lived embodied experience of historical injury, such a framework provides a corrective to the binary that locates historical injury either in narratives about the past or dismisses it entirely because it cannot be made readable outside of such fictions. While trauma studies has long embraced literary texts’ capacity to transmit the experience of historical injury by fostering narrative identifications, the novels under consideration in this project have revealed the limitations of such traumatic identifications. Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America*, for instance, demonstrates how American trauma rhetoric has been closely allied with US liberalism since the 1970s. Thus, rather than illuminating the contours of historical injury, the novel helps us understand the how such narratives can function, instead, to obscure other causal and temporal relationships relevant to understanding the importance of those injuries. Setting up and then thwarting narrative identification with its main narrator, Philip, *The Plot* suggests that the very literary structures that make identification possible simultaneously oversimplify the realities they seek to uncover.

W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* shares Roth’s concern that narrative coherence and identification risk creating a falsified understanding of the relevance of historical injury in the present. But unlike Roth, Sebald attempts to offer an alternative literary experience as a possible antidote to the trauma narrative. *Austerlitz*’s status as a second generation survivor with no direct access to the Holocaust past thematizes the way temporality can complicate the way historical injury is experienced in the present. Advancing a dynamic understanding of the present by gesturing towards a narrative present that consists of multiple overlapping sources of knowledge,
Sebald brings together factual knowledge and subjective experience across temporal divides. Thus, for Sebald, narrative functions as a way of mapping the connection between past and present by tracing the multiple nodes which make up the present moment. In *Austerlitz*, then, the literary texts, understood as reflective of affective experience of the present, propose an alternative to the limiting framework of literary and historical narrative chronology.

In *Disgrace* J.M. Coetzee is likewise concerned with the way in which literary texts may offer a more dynamic understanding of historical injury. Engaging with the limits of narrative stability, the novel imagines how the gaps of narrative coherence may be understood as revealing the affective condition of embodied experience. In this way, the novel suggests, historical injury belongs not to the body as stable identity, but must be understood as affective orientation to the present. It is only in narrative failure—here, specifically the failure to map Melanie’s and Lucy’s experiences of gendered violence onto one another—that historical injury can emerge in its radical specificity. Thus, rather than dismissing such gaps as unproductive or merely fictional—as Roth implies—*Disgrace* suggests that these spaces offer much potential for understanding the significance of historical injury in the present.

What is at stake for all of these novelists, then, is developing literary modes that open up the space of the present to closer examination. Challenging the trauma model of injury, they imagine alternative models of temporality that promise to be more conducive to articulating the status of historical injury in the present. By understanding historical injury not as belonging to a specific subject or collective, but as distributive with the capacity to affect, these writers implicitly reject the circular temporality of trauma. After all, trauma theory understands trauma as never really past, but instead as “haunting” the present in ways that transcend generational or geographical boundaries. Thus, while the trauma model acknowledges the importance of past
injury in the present, it simultaneously makes it difficult to imagine what it might mean, concretely and politically, to “work through” historical injury. Indeed, the traumatic return implies a constant present in which the effects of trauma never quite subside but continue to live on in the present as though unchanged by the passing of time. The novels under consideration here reject such a framework; the persistence of historical injury does not manifest as trauma to be inherited by subsequent generations, and injury is not bound to any stable identity category or subject position. For these authors, the temporality of injury is not circular but, rather, constitutive of the present moment.

It is important, then, that the novels I discuss are written from the point of view, not of victims of historical injury—a position occupied, for example, by Beloved’s Sethe—but instead from the perspective of those who traditionally have had no position to claim historical injury in the first place. Crucially, it is not through sympathetic identification that these characters are tied to the history of injury, but rather by virtue of the novels’ emphasis on recognizing historical injury as constitutive of the present. In these texts, historical injury matters because it continues to resonate in the present as affective force, not because it holds any particular identificatory significance.

Affect, which Berlant describes as moving “across persons and worlds,” shares much resemblance with new work on new materialisms which emphasizes the affective capacity of materiality. However, instead of understanding materiality only in relation to how it shapes individual or public feelings—that is, in their effects—scholars of the new materialisms have turned to the condition of agentic capacities of materiality itself. Rather than understanding objects as a site of passive mediation, these new materialisms have stressed materiality as an active force. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, for instance, have described materiality as
“always something more than ‘mere’ matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable” (9). Jane Bennett has further argued that materiality, including non-living objects, must be understood to possess the capacity to affect, a capacity which she terms “vibrant materiality.” “Vibrant materiality” does not limit agency exclusively to human subjects but instead imagines human and non-human objects as belonging to the same ontological plane. Following Deleuze and Guattari, Bennett refers to this network of agentic forces as “assemblages.” “Assemblages,” Bennett writes “are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within” (23-24). Importantly, new materialism does not privilege the human body over other kinds of objects, but rather imagines a “democracy of objects,” in which the materiality of the human body is considered alongside other nonhuman objects.¹

It is for this reason, I would argue, that new materialism is particularly productive for rethinking historical injury. Rather than privileging traumatic experience in an understanding of historical injury, new materiality emphasizes the way in which any event—including injury—is conditioned by its material contexts. While injury is subjective, the historical, social or political condition to which it belongs is not. That is to say, while injury is always specific—in fact, no two people experience it the same way—the fact that the event occurred is not dependent on subjective experience. Likewise, while injury requires embodied experience in order to become relevant as injury, the material condition of injury, understood as assemblage with the capacity to affect, is potentially more widely accessible. Indeed, for Bennett, the shifts of an assemblage results in a continually modifying mood:

An assemblage owes its agentic capacity to the vitality of the materialities that constitute it. Something like this congregational agency is called shi in the
Chinese tradition. . . . Shi is the style, energy, propensity, trajectory, or élan inherent to a specific arrangement of things. Originally a word used in military strategy, shi emerged in the description of a good general who must be able to read and then ride the shi of a configuration of moods, winds, historical trends, and armaments: shi names the dynamic force emanating from a spatio-temporal configuration rather than from any particular element within it. (Bennett 34-35)

What Bennett calls “shi” here is important because it suggests, once again, that each particular situation and each particular historical moment would be characterized by the mood that comes from any particular arrangement of forces. This mood would thus be distributive and not specific to individual subjectivities, yet it would potentially be shared by others. Thus, while injury itself must remain inaccessible outside of the place and time and particular embodiment, the mood of an assemblage which first brought it about may continue to resonate beyond the particular spatio-temporal arrangement. Historical injury then is something that can be made accessible through an affective experience in which these forces resonate. As we have seen, in W.G. Sebald’s Austerlitz, built spaces, as objects that possess a vital materiality, become triggers for an affective experience of the past.

The affective model rejects prioritizing any strict linearity in understanding the temporality of injury. After all, as Sebald makes clear, linearity is associated with the progress narratives of Enlightenment modernity. Since linear time moves consistently forward into the future, historical injury does not occupy any particularly privileged position in this model. Indeed, here injury is always in danger of being forgotten, a threat which can be counteracted only by active efforts of remembrance and memorialization. As object of memory, as the three novels make clear, historical injury always risks becoming absorbed into cultural narratives where it, far from speaking to its role in the condition of the present, functions to fix historical narratives and to justify political action. In these cases, historical injury, while seemingly
attentive to the past, appears as entirely forward-looking while ignoring the role of historical injury as constituting the present condition.

Moving away from both the circular temporality of trauma and the linear progress narrative of Enlightenment modernity, these novels are charting a new understanding of temporality in their articulation of the problem of historical injury. Indeed, their reframing of the temporality of injury suggests a break with earlier texts and traditions. While these novels’ emphasis on the significance of injury is certainly reminiscent of novels in the tradition of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, which I discussed in Chapter 1, they signify a distinct shift away from such novels’ conception of temporality marked by the traumatic event. In *Beloved*, for instance, it is Sethe’s act of infanticide that appears to hauntingly reenact the past, and which signifies not only the act itself but encompasses the entire history of slavery. Importantly, however, the novel understands this history through representative traumatic events which effects a break with a previous time to which one will never be able to return. In other words, the event occupies the limit that separates two distinctly separate time periods.

In contrast to the event-centered model of temporality, the novels I have discussed in the previous chapters to a certain extent let go of the significance of individual injuries but instead consider the way in which injuries are tied into larger, more complex political, social, and historical networks. This is not to say of course that, for these authors, individual traumatic experiences do not matter. Rather, for those who have not themselves experienced trauma, the separation into a ‘before’ and ‘after’ necessarily has little significance. Historical injury, because it is by definition temporally removed from the present, blurs the lines between perpetrators and victims. The temporality of injury these novels gesture toward is one that recognizes the continuum that connects past injury with its resonance in the present. The passage of time, in
these novels, neither leaves injury behind nor does it cling to it. Rather, the passage of time is understood as a condition of injury.

This new articulation of the temporality of injury becomes clear, for instance, in Salman Rushdie’s novel *Shalimar the Clown* (2005). Considering alternative ways of measuring and marking historical time, *Shalimar the Clown* presents a conscious move away from the model that prioritizes sudden violent political transformation. Instead, the novel prompts us to consider the way in which other more gradual processes may offer productive alternatives to existing models of global temporal and spatial relations. While the novel is invested in giving an account of the violence associated with the war between India and Pakistan during the Cold War, as critics have pointed out, Rushdie’s narrative voice elides the depiction of these crimes. At these moments, the narrative takes on a particularly detached tone, referring to the destruction of Shalimar’s hometown and the violence against its citizens, for instance, only as the “crackdown on Pachigam” (307). The narrative voice appears to struggle with putting into words what has happened, detailing not the events themselves but merely some of its aftermath. Rather than reading the lack of such depictions as an omission or a failure to make these crimes readable as human rights abuses, I would suggest that the novel attempts to offer an alternative model for understanding the temporality of violence.

Rather than the event-based model of temporality, the novel asks whether a slow movement of time, though less immediately perceptible, might not in fact be more appropriate for understanding the events in Kashmir. Early in the novel, depicting Max’s daughter India’s relationship with her father, Rushdie presents us with the following description:

> Until the age of eight she would climb him like an Everest. She had learned the story of the Himalayas on his knee, the story of the giant proto-continents, of the moment when India broke off from Gondwanaland and moved across the proto-oceans toward Laurasia. She closed her eyes and saw the huge collision, the
mighty mountains crumpling up into the sky. He taught her a lesson about time, about the slowness of the earth: the collision is still happening. (20-21)

In this model, the slow movement of time, while it makes events less immediately perceptible, does not render them any less powerful in their effects. Rob Nixon has recently called attention to the concept of “slow violence” by which he means violence that is often rendered invisible. In his book, Nixon calls for a rethinking of contemporary understandings of violence that would “complicate conventional assumptions about violence as a highly visible act” (3). Because slow violence unfolds across time, often separating perpetrators and victims by many years or even decades, it does not lend itself to media portrayals. He continues: “We need to account for how the temporal dispersion of slow violence affects the way we perceive and respond to a variety of social afflictions—from domestic abuse to posttraumatic stress and . . . environmental calamities” (3). Making slow violence visible, Nixon argues, requires new ways of representing it. In Shalimar the Clown, Rushdie invokes an alternative temporality, one in which terrorism does not suddenly appear as a violent spectacle but one in which such events must be understood in the larger historical contexts to which they belong. In a globalized world in which “[e]verywhere was now a part of everywhere else” and in which “[o]ur lives, our stories, flowed into one another’s, were no longer our own, individual, discrete” (37), the event-based model of political transition no longer suffices.

This project has been invested in locating a shift in the way in which the authors under consideration have begun to rethink the role of historical injury in the present. Such questions reflect a sense of ethical, political, economic responsibility toward that past in ways that differs in significant ways from earlier such engagements with historical injury. Christian Moraru has argued that American fiction since 1989 reveals a shift towards a new consciousness of “being-in-relation with an other” (2), one, he argues, that has given “birth . . . to a particular way of
seeing this world and ourselves in it” (2) which Moraru terms “cosmodernism.” While, for Moraru, this shift in literary-cultural periodization is one that foregrounds the responsibility towards the “other,” I would speculate that we may understand this concern instead as a new conceptualization of the temporality of injury at the end of the Cold War. After all, if World War II and the Holocaust represent the end of a certain linear understanding of temporality and Enlightenment narratives of progress, then the end of the Cold War suggests a final conclusion of such narratives. Such a reading echoes Eric Cazdyn and Imre Szeman’s recent observation that globalization, as an ideological as well as economic project, cannot imagine an “after,” thus ushering in a new age that is defined by a sense of timelessness.

The authors discussed in this project, each in their own way, seem to counteract such a notion of timelessness by emphasizing historical injury as an integral aspect to any responsible understanding of the present. Rejecting formulations such as the inability to imagine an “after globalization,” or Francis Fukuyama’s notion of the “end of history,” these writers conceive of the contemporary moment as one shaped, if not always legibly, by the past. Responsibility towards “the other,” in these novels seems to emerge not as the goal of globalization or any imagination of a new cosmopolitanism but rather as the result of a new recognition of a shared temporal moment. For these writers, the literary offers a mode to render legible the connective materialities that underlie the political present.
Notes

1 See Bryant.

2 Anker has argued that Rushdie doesn’t depict the violence that the novel criticizes. She writes: “In sum, while Shalimar deplores the media’s tendency both to abstract non-western events and to sensationalize suffering through crisis-driven language, its narrative resorts to almost identical representational tactics in depicting abuses of human rights. By exaggerating their resistance to comprehension and construing postcolonial violence as acute, it exhibits obstructionism similar to that for which Rushdie berates media reportage” (Anker “Narrating” 157)

3 Thus, the novel ends the “crackdown on Pachigam” with the following words: “So, to repeat: there was no Pachigam anymore. Pachigam was destroyed. Imagine for yourself. Second attempt: The village of Pachigam still existed on maps of Kashmir, but that day it ceased to exist anywhere else, except in memory. Third and final attempt: The beautiful village of Pachigam still exists” (309).

4 They write: “Globalization involves a certain configuration of time – one that cannot imagine an “after.” Modernity could have a post-modernity to follow it. But globalization? Post-globalization sounds like some dystopian coda to everything, not a new phase of human existence.” (Cazdyn 2)


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