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**Probing the Limits of Classic Trauma Representation:  
The Juxtaposition of Traumas in the Contemporary  
American Novel**

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The Juxtaposition of Traumas in the Context of Current Discourses on Trauma

This study is a continuation of my Magister thesis which analyzed the representation of 9/11 in four US-American novels<sup>1</sup>. In my Magister thesis, one of the novels, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, stood out because it was the only one dealing openly with 9/11 and other collective historical traumas – the bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima. In 2009, the same year in which I handed in my Magister thesis, Michael Rothberg published a study in which he stated that since the end of World War II, a tendency had existed in scientific and artistic discourses which assumed that linking different collective memories could launch productive processes of working through and mutual understanding. This discursive trend which, according to Rothberg, has hitherto been marginalized by scientific discourse, was most prominent between 1949 and 1961, when events in the struggle for decolonization such as the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962) coincided with processes of working through the events of World War II as embodied by the Eichmann trial (1961) (Rothberg, *Multidirectional* 107). Also in 2009, Colum McCann published his widely acclaimed novel *Let the Great World Spin*. Despite its dealing with a variety of traumatic experiences from slavery and racism to IRA bombings and the Vietnam War, critics readily labeled it “9/11 novel” (T. Adams; Cusatis 183; Hones 5) or “9/11 fiction” (Flannery, “Internationalizing” 294). Regarding Rothberg's findings and the two novel's juxtaposition of traumas two questions arose: Did other novels exist that juxtaposed collective historical traumas, like 9/11 and the bombing of Dresden, so that one could trace the existence of an unacknowledged subgenre of the trauma novel<sup>2</sup> in the tradition of the marginalized discourse Rothberg describes? And was the juxtaposed representation of traumas limited to novels dealing with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and thus a reaction to them and the discourses prevailing in their aftermath which silenced voices that suggested 9/11 was a consequence of American foreign policy and “quickly [forgot]” “global historical events that may have prefaced or prefigured the terrorist attacks” (Banita 44)? Further research uncovered two other novels by US-American authors representing more than one collective

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<sup>1</sup> Lynne Sharon Schwartz's *The Writing on the Wall* (2005), Jess Walter's *The Zero* (2006), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2006), and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007).

<sup>2</sup> I use the term ‘trauma novel’ to avoid longer terms while being well aware of its shortcomings and definitional problems (see also chapter 2 of this study).

historical trauma: Bebe Moore Campbell's *What You Owe Me* (2001) and Nicole Krauss' *Great House* (2010). Both novels do not include the events of 9/11, *What You Owe Me's* publication even predating the terrorist attacks, and thus suggested that a trend was in fact emerging, but independent of the events of 9/11. *What You Owe Me* relates the collective historical traumas of racism, slavery, and the Holocaust; *Great House* juxtaposes the Holocaust to Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile, war traumas of Israeli soldiers, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Especially the representation of trauma in the latter two novels stands in stark contrast to the 'uniqueness' discourse which ostracizes all attempts at comparing other collective historical traumas with the Holocaust and can thus be functionalized in the often diagnosed "battle of the most martyred minority" (Friedberg 354, 368; Rothberg, *Multidirectional* 8-9; Stone 138) taking place especially in the United States. Since, as Roger Luckhurst (*Trauma*) repeatedly makes clear, trauma is not just a psychological category but, at least by now, has turned into a cultural condition, it is essential to analyze the cultural products, such as literature, which establish trauma as a paradigm or reinforce its influence to understand the workings of current western societies. The analysis of novels which juxtapose several collective historical traumas forms a significant part of this task. Such an analysis necessarily needs to pose the questions of how traumas are linked, if the novels react to the discourses they defy, and if the juxtaposition of traumas contributes to a hierarchization of the traumas, underlines commonalities or proposes other relations between them.

## 1.2. Aim of the Study

The main aim of this study is to examine if in contemporary US-American fictional texts trauma is "the object of a competitive struggle" (Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory* 87) or if authors deprive this potential for conflict of its power and present an alternative 'blueprint of reality' (*Wirklichkeitsentwurf*, Gymnich and Nünning 14) by linking the historical and cultural moments of identity formation, as which collective traumas have often been used (e.g. LaCapra, Volkan). I will deduce answers to those questions from the analyses of US-American novels with regard to several aspects: First, I will reveal which traumas are linked in the texts and if there are traumas that occur more often than others. Second, I will analyze which literary strategies and theoretical concepts are applied to link traumas. Third, I will examine if the novels' stance towards the classic trauma discourses on representation, comparability and hierarchies of traumas shows also in other elements apart from the juxtaposed representation of traumas.

In her often-quoted monography on trauma fiction, Anne Whitehead analyzed Anne Michaels “post-Holocaust novel”, as she calls it, *Fugitive Pieces*. She responded to criticism put forward because of the novels alleged aestheticization of the Holocaust: “The challenge is to bring the past into constellation with the present, so that the remnants of history are not inert but assume a living force and a significant relation to contemporary events” (Whitehead 72). In my opinion, this challenge is the challenge all fictionalizations of historical events face. When trauma comes in, the challenge becomes even fiercer since readers and critics, boosted by discourses of unrepresentability and incomparability, impose a number of expectations and taboos on the work in question. However, contemporary novelists from the United States, but also from other countries, seem to deem it necessary to face this challenge in order to wrest new meanings from historical and contemporary events and to warn of the consequences of discrimination, war, and terrorism for the population. In 2018, nuclear saber-rattling, chemical warfare, hate campaigns, and #MeToo illustrate the current pertinence of analyses of novels which, by linking collective historical traumas, not only bring to mind those traumatic events and highlight their common devastating impact on human lives, but above all emphasize similarities between groups that oppose jingoism and uniqueness discourses abused for political ends as well as historical amnesia. The depiction of human carnage caused by nuclear bombings and “normal” warfare, of the traumatizing effects of decades of individual and institutionalized racism in the US, and of the consequences of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in particular, show the current pertinence of the novels that are object of this study.

### 1.3. Selection of Texts

The corpus of this study consists of four novels: Bebe Moore Campbell’s *What You Owe Me* (2001), Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2006), Colum McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin* (2009), and Nicole Krauss’ *Great House* (2010).

The main criterion of selection is that the novels link collective traumatic experiences from different historical contexts. Campbell’s novel depicts the friendship between a Polish Holocaust survivor and a Black woman, descendant of slaves and suffering from the ongoing racist practices, that derives from their similar traumatic experiences. Foer’s novel juxtaposes the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, with the bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima during the Second World War. Racism against Blacks, the Vietnam War, and 9/11 are only some of the collective historical traumas McCann broaches in his complex novel. Krauss’ novel deals with the Holocaust trauma of

survivors and subsequent generations and juxtaposes it with the war trauma of Israeli soldiers and Pinochet's practices of persecution and torture in Chile. The corpus hence aims to reflect the wide range of collective traumas circulating in contemporary US culture.

The novels of the corpus were published between 2001 and 2010 by authors of US-American origin – or authors who have been residents of the United States for years and hold US-citizenship, like McCann. They hence all qualify as contemporary US-American fiction, an aspect relevant with regard to their comparability. The time range of the novels' publications reflects the increased tendency to juxtapose several traumas in the realm of one novel after the turn of the century.

The corpus does not claim to be absolute; the scale of this study did not allow for the inclusion of further novels. However, it is composed of texts that prove to be particularly suitable to answer the exploratory questions of this study I will outline in the following. In my analyses of the use of intertextuality and also to elucidate my findings, I will draw on further novels that deal with similar topics or apply similar strategies for representing traumas. The corpus was moreover designed to include female and male authors in equal shares to reflect possible gender-dependent perspectives.

#### **1.4. The Methodological Challenge of Analyzing the Juxtaposition of Traumas**

Considering the potentially subversive force of a juxtaposed representation of traumas – it challenges, after all, the powerful discourse on the uniqueness of the Holocaust – it is strikingly absent in scholarly discussions of trauma novels. Apart from Rothberg's study, only some articles dealing with Foer's novel reflect on the meaning of embracing several traumas in the realm of one novel (Däwes; Mullins; Saal). Most current studies analyzing the fictional representation of trauma in general draw on the classic approach of literary trauma studies. Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and other Yale-based critics developed a theory of what Roger Luckhurst and Alan Gibbs call "cultural trauma" (Luckhurst, *Trauma* 81; Gibbs 15) based on Caruth's definition of trauma as "the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge . . . and thus continually returns, in its exactness, at a later time" (Caruth, "Recapturing" 153). This theory presupposes above all the incapability of the traumatized to understand the traumatic events and their feelings as well as to access memory of them willfully, from which the notion of the unrepresentability of traumatic experiences is deduced. The most significant drawback of the

classic approach, at least for this paper, constitutes its incapability to account for links between several collective historical traumas (Craps 2). One could argue that this shortfall derives from the close affinity between the Caruthian discourse, which insists on the unrepresentability of trauma and especially the Holocaust (Leys 268), and the discourse of uniqueness, supported by Elie Wiesel, Steven T. Katz, and others.<sup>3</sup>

Although studies on literary representations of trauma, individual or collective, have proliferated since the early 1990s, no methodological approach emerged that could be applied to analyze all four novels that are subject of this study. The classic trauma discourse's tools can only elucidate how literary techniques, such as fragmented narrative, intertextuality, or metaphors, are used to represent traumas. These devices suffice to analyze how traumas are linked in Campbell's and Krauss' novels, as will become clear from my analysis below. The classic approach to the analysis of trauma representations also worked in my Magister thesis to carve out recurring trauma symptoms, symbols and themes in the four 9/11 novels analyzed. To analyze the links between different traumas established in McCann's and Foer's novels it is, however, not sufficient. For the analysis of those two novels I therefore decided to combine the trauma study approach with two other concepts that emerge from the novels as relevant: network theory, a theoretical approach so far neglected by trauma studies, and psychogeography.<sup>4</sup>

### 1.5. Methodology and Outline of the Study

Against the background of the fierce debates surrounding the representability of trauma, the comparability of traumas, and the struggle for attention of certain groups of victims, and given the scarce scholarship on the juxtaposed representation of traumas, three clusters of questions arise:

1. How are the presented traumas juxtaposed? Which literary strategies are applied?  
What concepts can account for the juxtaposition of traumas when traditional approaches based on ideas on incomparability meet their limits?

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<sup>3</sup> In the following I will refer to the Caruthian approach and the post-Caruthian canon that draws on her theory as "classic trauma discourse". I will elaborate on the assumptions of this discourse in more detail in chapter 2.

<sup>4</sup> Parts of this paragraph have been published in my article "Analyzing the Network of Traumas in Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin*".

2. Do the novels assess the juxtaposition, i.e. suggest a positive or negative outcome or is the outcome left open? In what ways do the authors develop ideas or theories which contest the isolated consideration of traumatic events and outline new ways of dealing with trauma without lapsing into conventional hierarchical patterns or contests for attention?
3. Are there any signs in the texts that the authors are aware of the aforementioned debates, do they cater to the expectations of Caruth and others or position their novels deliberately in response to them?

To answer these questions, this study is based on the close readings of the aforementioned four novels which represent several collective historical traumas. Close readings are necessary to detect strategies for connecting traumas and to reveal text-immanent references to the classic trauma discourse and to possible effects of linking traumas. Moreover, close readings can elucidate the thick descriptions used especially in McCann's novel, but also in *Great House* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, to represent a multitude of traumas. The close readings of the novels follow the tradition of narratological text analysis, a methodology especially relevant since it is geared to the analysis of intermedial references, open to interdisciplinary connections, and emphasizes the function of textual strategies for the constitution of meaning (Sommer 95–96).

Since the tools of classic literary and trauma studies cannot explain the more complex connections established between traumas in the novels by Foer and McCann, I will apply psychogeography, a spatial approach, to the former, and network theory to the latter. The reasons for these methodological decisions will be given in the theoretical parts of the respective chapters.

In order to trace a possible development in the juxtaposed representation of traumas, I will present the analytical findings of the novels in the order of their publications, starting with *What You Owe Me* and concluding with *Great House*.

From the exploratory questions and the methodological approach results the following structure of this paper: After this introductory part, chapter 2 will give a brief overview of concepts and discourses dealing with trauma that are relevant for all subsequent text analyses. I will first give a definition of trauma as I use the concept in this study. Next, I will summarize the main psychological and literary assumptions of the classic trauma discourse and present criticism leveled at them. Subsequently, I will introduce discourses drawing on the classic trauma discourse that are relevant for my analyses, namely the discourse that stipulates the uniqueness of the Holocaust and the discourse stating that a contest of victims or a

hierarchization of suffering takes place especially in the United States. In the last section of this chapter, those discourses will be presented that offer concepts such as the multidirectionality of memories as alternatives to the classic trauma discourse.

Chapters 3 to 6 contain the close readings of the novels. Each analytical chapter starts with an introduction to the novel's contents and general structure followed by a presentation of the collective historical it deals with. The third subchapter traces how the novel caters to the expectations of the classic trauma discourse by depicting the traumatization of characters in certain ways or representing traumatic events metaphorically. This subchapter focuses on a select number of examples which carve out similarities and differences between the novels. The fourth subchapter of all analyses puts the novels in the context of their scholarly and public reception to elucidate the role of the juxtaposition of traumas in it and to explain why they form part of certain subgenres.

From the fifth subchapter onwards the structure of the analytical chapters differs. The chapters on *What You Owe Me* and *Great House*, the two novels in which the linked representation of traumas can be analyzed by applying classic literary devices and trauma concepts, proceed by presenting these techniques and concepts. Subsequently, they illuminate the novels' positions with regard to assumptions of the classic trauma discourse, that is their explicit or implicit criticism of the notions of incomparability or hierarchies of suffering.

The chapters on *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *Let the Great World Spin* include introductions to the aforementioned additional theoretical concepts (psychogeography and network theory respectively) that are applied in their analysis. Consequently, the fifth subchapters start by giving examples from the novel which highlight why the respective concepts were chosen. They then introduce the concepts and present existing approaches that combine them with trauma theory. The chapter on Foer's novel also includes a discussion of studies that have already used similar concepts in their analysis of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. The close readings of the two novels follow the structure of the other analytical chapters by first presenting strategies for linking traumas and then illustrating the novels' stances on the assumptions of the classic trauma discourse and related discourses.

All analytical chapters end with brief interim conclusions that sum up the chapters' insights.

Chapter 7 summarizes the main findings of this study and their implications for further research: The first subchapter consists of a synopsis of the text analyses that pinpoints which

traumas are most often linked and deduces similarities and differences regarding literary strategies and the text-immanent assessments of the juxtaposition of traumas. Moreover, it discusses the novels' stances on the classic trauma discourse. The final subchapter suggests starting points for future research concerning the novels analyzed in this study, the representation of trauma in general, and with regard to the juxtaposed representation of a plurality of traumas.

## 2. The Classic Trauma Discourse and Its Critics

### 2.1. Defining Trauma

The end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been marked by a vast transdisciplinary and transnational interest in memory. Hans-Jürgen Grabbe and Sabine Schindler even speak of a “memory-boom that has taken place both inside and outside the academy over the past two decades” (2). Consequently, there has been considerable scientific output regarding a large number of questions related to the memory discourse, which include also the representability of traumatic memories and their significance for the formation of individual and collective identities. Despite the multitude of approaches, most academic papers on memory and related topics still refer to the groundbreaking studies by Maurice Halbwachs on collective memory (*Cadres sociaux, Mémoire collective*) and by Pierre Nora on sites of memory (*lieux de mémoire*).<sup>5</sup>

Since the 1980s the trauma discourse has formed an important part of the memory discourse.<sup>6</sup> This discourse, too, is marked by the variety of disciplines that deal with and contribute to the analysis of trauma, like psychology, philosophy, sociology, history and political science (Kaplan 39). Consequently, a high number of definitions exists with varying foci of analysis due to its different creators. Definitions thus range from individual to collective, from psychologic to cultural, and from punctual to systemic understandings of trauma. I will not go into the multitude of trauma concepts here, but extensive overviews can be found in Stef Craps', Ruth Leys', and Roger Luckhurst's studies, for instance.

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Carrier and Rothberg, for example, refer to Halbwachs, Max Paul Friedman and Andreas Huyssen refer to both Nora and Halbwachs. In German-speaking academia also the works by Jan and Aleida Assman are frequently quoted (Erl 171).

<sup>6</sup> Kaplan gives a critical overview of the humanities' “faddish” interest in trauma during the 1980s and 1990s and offers possible reasons for it (23-41).

A consequence of the prevalence of Caruth's analytic approach to trauma is the frequent citation and use of her definition in cultural trauma studies which states that "[t]he trauma is the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge . . . and thus continually returns, in its exactness, at a later time" ("Recapturing" 153). This definition draws significantly on Sigmund Freud's and other psychologists' findings which emphasize unexpectedness and horror as triggers of trauma. Especially the definition's stress on unexpectedness accounts for its categorization as a theory of punctual trauma.

With regard to the novels I analyze in this study, the events they represent, such as the Holocaust, 9/11, and slavery, can be considered traumas because the victims are depicted as suffering from symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and because they are perceived and treated as such in the extraliterary as well as the fictional sphere by the media, the communities involved, and the government. Despite the undeniable differences between them regarding the number of people concerned, for instance, the traumas dealt with can be argued to belong to a common category since, by referring to real historical events, they are all historical traumas. I follow here Dominick LaCapra's definition: "In historical trauma, it is possible to locate . . . traumatizing events. But it may not be possible to locate or localize the experience of trauma that is not dated or, in a sense, punctual" (*Writing* 81). LaCapra's definition of historical trauma hence can, in contrast to Caruth's punctual definition of trauma, include traumas like racism, that are not caused by one "unexpected" event. It can be applied to traumas which are "chronic and cumulative, so woven into the fabric of our societies, that they cannot count as shocks in the way the Nazi persecution and genocide do" (106) as Forter demands. The traumas<sup>7</sup> represented in the novels in this study are also all *collective* traumas because they hit a high number of individuals simultaneously and affect collective identity.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> I am aware of the origins of trauma theory and cultural trauma studies in western thinking and psychology and that, consequently, the developed concepts cannot be applied to all cultural contexts unquestioningly. However, the authors, whose text are subject of my dissertation, have all been socialized in the USA (or Europe, like McCann) and can thus be assumed to be familiar with the assumptions and concepts of classic trauma studies. This familiarity shows in the novels' frequent use of PTSD symptoms and techniques deemed suitable for trauma representation by the classic trauma discourse as my analyses will show. Moreover, those instances in which their works do not comply with the classic concepts and assumptions of how trauma should be represented can be considered a critical response to these concepts and assumptions.

<sup>8</sup> I could hence also use the term "cultural trauma" coined by Jeffrey C. Alexander who argues that "[c]ultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity

## 2.2. Psychological and Aesthetic Assumptions of the Classic Trauma Discourse

In the 1990s, Caruth's work paved the way for the development of an academic discourse which above all dealt with the analysis of literary representations of traumatic experiences and memories. Caruth's theory is based on a combination of Paul De Man's deconstructivist theory with psychological and neurobiological findings, especially by Sigmund Freud and Bessel van der Kolk, and includes analyses of trauma representations, such as Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) and the film *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959). In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Caruth developed three main characteristics of psychological trauma relevant for literary and cultural analysis: First, the incapability of trauma victims to grasp the traumatic event while it takes place as well as to access memory of it willfully. Second, since the traumatic experience cannot be processed while it occurs and since traumatic memory is attributed a special status of inaccessibility, the traumatic experience cannot be represented. In this argument, the Holocaust as "event at the limits" (J. Adams 23) of representational and conceptual categories plays an important role since "the unassimilability of the event comprises its very identity as trauma" (26). This line of thought has recently been picked up by Jean Baudrillard, among others, who, in the aftermath of 9/11, called into question the representability of traumatic experiences and the moral acceptability of representations respectively. Third, despite this unrepresentability, to achieve a working through, the victim needs to express her experience; otherwise she will be haunted by her trauma, for example, in the form of nightmares and uncontrollable, and again overwhelming, outbreaks of memories. Due to their affinity to metaphorical representation, Caruth designates "psychoanalysis and literature as particularly privileged forms of writing that can attend to [the] perplexing paradoxes of trauma" as Luckhurst summarizes (*Trauma* 5).<sup>9</sup> From these paradoxes a need for new techniques of representation is inferred, a claim that led to the postulation of a number of narrative techniques deemed suitable for representing the unrepresentable.

Caruth and literary critics in her wake usually agree on a number of characteristics of trauma narratives, which, in their view, translate best the traumatic experience by meeting

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in fundamental and irrevocable ways" Alexander ("Toward" 1). I prefer 'collective historical traumas', however, because the term distinguishes the novels from others dealing with individual traumas, such as rape, and because it emphasizes the fact that the traumas are not fictional.

<sup>9</sup> Caruth develops this notion, for instance, in the first two chapters of *Unclaimed Experience*.

Caruth's call for experimental artistic forms (*Unclaimed* 5). These characteristics or narrative devices are fashioned around Caruth's claims and around symptoms of PTSD<sup>10</sup>, the current medical diagnosis for traumatization, and include: First, a fragmented or dispersed narrative and shifts in narrating voice which supposedly transmit the confusing experience of trauma (Gibbs 27) and the process of working through by narrating and re-narrating the core traumatic experience (Whitehead 88). Second, the repetition of events, words, and phrases as well as flashbacks functions as textual mark of repetition compulsion and unexpected intrusion of the unprocessed traumatic experience. Special metaphors, such as 'ghost' or 'haunting,' are accepted narrative strategies to represent these phenomena (Whitehead 5–7). Third, a solely indirect or allegorical depiction of the traumatic event is deemed appropriate for the representation of the unrepresentable and unspeakable (Versluys 14; Ganteau and Onega Jaén 5). Fourth, another accepted way of attesting to the unrepresentability of trauma is not representing it at all and putting into evidence the absence of memory of the traumatic event by recurring to metaphors such as 'void' and 'hole' (Ganteau and Onega Jaén 10; Whitehead 9). Fifth, characters' frequent inability to speak and their recurrence to silence (aphasia) are seen as attesting to the limits of language and narrative in face of trauma (Versluys 89; Gibbs 150).<sup>11</sup> The possibility that trauma narratives deal with more than one trauma does not play a role in Caruth's theorizing, or in that of her adherents.

Caruth's theory, which "has received considerable approbation, not only from humanists in various fields but also from psychiatrists and physicians" as Leys suggests (266) and which was confirmed by the work of Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman, Dori Laub, and other Yale critics, became the standard approach for the analysis of literary representations of trauma. Felman and Laub contribute to this approach the notion that giving testimony plays an important role in the treatment of Holocaust victims and analyze the role of the listener or addressee in the process of healing (Felman and Laub 57) – two aspects relevant for my analyses. Today, the Caruthian approach is still frequently applied, for example by Hamish

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<sup>10</sup> According to Leys, typical symptoms of PTSD are "flashbacks, nightmares, and other re-experiences, emotional numbing, depression, guilt, autonomic arousal, explosive violence or tendency to hypervigilance" (2). For an extensive discussion of the development and symptoms of PTSD see, for example, Luckhurst (*Trauma*) (1,29, 58-62, 202-14).

<sup>11</sup> The innovativeness of these techniques is open to debate since they include many of the techniques deemed typical of postmodernism, like symbolism and incoherent narrative. In any event, they have become standard techniques for representing trauma as my following text analyses underline.

Dalley, Anne Whitehead, Kristiaan Versluys, and by Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega Jaén. Together with Caruth's theory these studies form the classic trauma discourse in cultural and literary studies, also known as post-Caruthian canon or "cultural trauma theory" (Luckhurst, *Trauma* 81; Gibbs 15).

However, for the last fifteen years, Caruth's theory as well as studies following her assumptions have been severely criticized by scholars such as Leys, Luckhurst, Alan Gibbs, and Joshua Pederson.<sup>12</sup> Leys' criticism of Caruth's theory is especially severe. Expressing her general "impatience with the sloppiness of her [Caruth's] theoretical arguments" (305) and the arbitrariness of the close readings, Leys criticizes among other aspects Caruth's idea that the victims of trauma are haunted by "a literal, nonsymbolic, and nonrepresentational *memory* of the traumatic event" (272) which intrudes into their lives in the form of nightmares. According to Leys, Caruth deduces this theory of the haunting "unclaimed experience" (Caruth, *Unclaimed*) from Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (belatedness) which in Leys' view does not stand up to scrutiny because, in contrast to the concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, in which past events are "determined as traumatic by a retroactive conferral of meaning" (Leys 271), Caruth's "model of trauma as defined by latency is much closer to the model of an infectious disease, in which an 'incubation period' or period of delay intervenes between the initial infection and the subsequent appearance of the symptoms" (271). In his article "Speak, Trauma: Toward a Revised Understanding of Literary Trauma Theory" (2014), Pederson, like also Gibbs (12), questions Caruth's concept of literality and traumatic amnesia, that is the incapability of the traumatized subject to recall the traumatic event. Pederson rests his critique upon Richard McNally's 2003 study *Remembering Trauma*, which revealed mistakes in the neurological and psychological studies by van der Kolk on which Caruth relied. Gibbs, in a similar vein, deplors the fact that the false assumptions underlying Caruth's theory have led to the dispersion of "a variety of literary narrative strategies that are understood to formally represent the [symptoms]" (17) of trauma, that is symptoms which may not even exist. Consequently, Gibbs' main concern with regard to classic literary trauma studies is the emergence of a "trauma genre," "a self-reinforcing circuit of fictional and non-fictional prose narratives" (2) based on the basically unreliable findings of Caruth and her followers.

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<sup>12</sup> For further critiques of Caruth see, for example, Craps, and Kansteiner.

Luckhurst criticizes classic literary trauma studies for the tight aesthetic requirements it imposes on representations of trauma. Since the stipulated “aesthetic is uncompromisingly avant-garde: experimental, fragmented, refusing the consolations of beautiful form, and suspicious of familiar representational and narrative conventions” (Luckhurst, *Trauma* 81), a large part of trauma representations is excluded from recognition while at the same time narrative possibilities are curtailed.

In line with Luckhurst’s criticism of the tight aesthetic requirements the classic trauma discourse imposes, a branch of criticism has become pronounced in recent years which draws attention to the consequences of classic literary trauma studies’ uncritical use of Euro-, or Western-Centric psychological trauma models and its call for avant-garde narrative techniques. According to Stef Craps, Claire Stocks, Jill Bennett and Rosanne Kennedy, Caruthian theory excludes most postcolonial experiences of trauma by presupposing ‘western’ concepts of identity as well as an event-based model of trauma that does not account for insidious or structural traumas, like racism or colonialism. In their discussion of the classic approach to trauma narratives, Craps, Gibbs, and Cheyette conclude that, besides not being able to account for non-western trauma narratives, it does not even necessarily offer adequate models to analyze US (or other ‘western’) trauma experiences and trauma narratives (Craps et al. 910–11) – a point the analyses of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *Let the Great World Spin* underline.

The classic approach to trauma representations and their analysis has been the object of severe criticism for diverse reasons, as I have shown. I will critically discuss these aspects of the classic discourse in the text analyses when I show how the novels orchestrate them.<sup>13</sup>

### 2.3. The Uniqueness Discourse

An important sub-discourse of the trauma discourse for this study was most prominent during the 1980s but is still effective today: various analyses dealing with problems of artistic treatment of the Holocaust identified the Holocaust as horrible beyond comparison and hence questioned per se the possibility of its representation referring to Adorno's *Bilderverbot*<sup>14</sup>, for example. Caruth’s

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<sup>13</sup> This subchapter has appeared in similar form in my article “Analyzing the Network of Traumas in Colum McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin*”.

<sup>14</sup> Still today discussants frequently refer to Adorno’s “*Bilderverbot*” (e.g. Huyssen 135).

claim that trauma is not representable is intimately linked to this special discourse on the Holocaust, supported by Elie Wiesel, Steven T. Katz, and others, which ostracizes all attempts at comparing other collective historical traumas with the Holocaust since it considers the Holocaust “the watershed event of the modern age because, uniquely terrible and unspeakable, it radically exceeds our capacity to grasp and understand it” (Leys 267–68). This discourse has become known as the uniqueness discourse or the discourse on the incomparability of traumas (especially with regard to the Holocaust)<sup>15</sup> and still has massive impact on the representation and acceptance of collective historical events other than the Holocaust. The relevance of this discourse shows in the multitude of studies dealing with or referring to it. To name just a few which reflect the discourse’s ongoing relevance over the years: Peter Novick claims in his widely discussed study on *The Holocaust in American Life* that attempts at comparing the Holocaust to other atrocities is considered a “felonious assault” (198), Friedberg finds that the “insistence on incomparability and ‘uniqueness’ of the Nazi Holocaust is precisely what prohibits our collective comprehension of genocide as a phenomenon of Western ‘civilization,’ not as a reiterative series of historical events, each in its own way ‘unique’” (368), Rothberg states that the argument of the uniqueness and incomparableness of the Holocaust is still frequently used (*Multidirectional* 7). According to Yvonne Robel, also in Germany the uniqueness of the Holocaust is still a frequently used argument (201–02),<sup>16</sup> Shaul Magid claims that the “often-unspoken idea that the Holocaust was a unique event has become a key feature of American Jewish identity” (1).<sup>17</sup>

The ongoing significance of the uniqueness discourse is also reflected in the many critiques dealing with it. According to Friedberg, “survivors and scholars, among them a number of Jewish intellectuals such as Hannah Arendt, Irving Louis Horowitz, Israel Charny . . . , Norman Finkelstein, Peter Novik [sic], and others” have challenged the assumptions of the uniqueness discourse (357). Already in 1995 Alan Rosenbaum published an edited volume asking “Is the

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<sup>15</sup> Being a German scholar, I am aware of the sensitivity of claims for or against a comparability of the Holocaust. It is of utter importance for this study to give an overview of both arguments. The given arguments do not reflect my personal opinion.

<sup>16</sup> Robel underlines that it has hitherto been impossible to reach a consensus on comparing other mass murders (*Massenverbrechen*) with the Holocaust due to the specifics of the German context (202).

<sup>17</sup> Friedberg gives a list of further “uniqueness proponents such as Deborah Lipstadt, Steven Katz, Saul Friedländer, Michael Marrus, Yehuda Bauer, Lucy Dawidowicz, and others” who “share an insistence of the exclusivity of the Nazi Holocaust as an unparalleled event in the history of the twentieth century” (357).

Holocaust Unique?” in which the Holocaust is compared to other instances of genocide and which has been republished twice, with a third edition in 2009. Friedberg, in her concern with drawing attention to the “genocide” committed against Native Americans, points to the fact that “[w]hat is perhaps ‘unique’ about the Nazi Holocaust is that it represents the first incidence in history of genocidal assault directed at an assimilated, ‘civilized’ (and therefore human) population in central Europe” (364). This quote not only illustrates the ferocity of the debate but also draws attention to an argument often cited to substantiate the uniqueness of the Holocaust, namely its unprecedentedness. Jenni J. Adams quotes LaCapra’s fear of a sacralization of the events of the Holocaust which “might divest them from agency and ethical scrutiny” (28). Rothberg’s criticism is centered on the uniqueness discourse’s participation in a discourse that “understands collective memory as competitive memory – as a zero-sum struggle over scarce resources” (*Multidirectional* 3) thus highlighting its connection to the discourse that presupposes, or tries to establish, a contest of victimized groups and their hierarchization in public opinion.<sup>18</sup>

#### 2.4. Discourses on the Contest of Victims and the Hierarchy of Suffering

Rothberg puts forward the thesis that most national and international conflicts are rooted in the assumption that in public awareness there is only room for one collective memory at the time, that is that with regard to collective traumatic memories only one group of victims can benefit from public attention (*Multidirectional* 3). This line of thinking hence triggers a fight among groups that have collectively experienced events that can be considered traumatic, for public attention and the benefits allegedly deriving from it, such as acknowledgement of their suffering or governmental recompense. For these processes several phrases have been coined. Adam Zachary Newton speaks of “the story of competitive scar and wound” (6), Zierler of “competitive comparison” (47). Friedberg refers to the “battle of the most martyred minority” and “comparative victimology” (368), Stone speaks of “hierarchies of victimization” and a “competition for ethnic validation through suffering” (138). Rothberg explicitly deals with the, according to him, still frequently used argument of the uniqueness and incomparableness of the Holocaust which establishes a morally unjustifiable “hierarchy of suffering” “and removes

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<sup>18</sup> Andreas Huyssen also criticizes the discourse of uniqueness for its tendency to create competition between victims in his study *Present Pasts*.

that suffering from the field of historical agency” (*Multidirectional* 7). As Rothberg’s argument and the connotations of the terms used to refer to the phenomenon show, the discourses on the contest of victims<sup>19</sup> and the hierarchy of suffering<sup>20</sup> are mostly critically discussed. According to Friedberg, Novick and Norman Finkelstein criticize in particular how the uniqueness discourse “[ascribes] victim status to a community that demonstrates little sign of actual victimization in a culture where the victim is victor” (366), thus foregrounding the problematic position of Jewish Americans in the contest for attention and recompense.

The ongoing relevance of these discourses shows also in the novels of this study which, due to their embracing of several collective historical traumas, challenge the incomparability of traumatic experiences – and in two cases even explicitly of the Holocaust – and broach explicitly and implicitly attempts at establishing hierarchies of suffering.

In the following section, I will briefly introduce a discourse that can be considered a reaction to the fact that the Caruthian approach excludes connections between traumas since it calls for an inclusion of these links and offers theoretical thoughts on analytical tools.

## **2.5. A New Stance on Trauma: The Discourse of Inherent Links Between Traumas and the Multidirectionality of Memories**

Levy and Sznajder propose an approach to collective memory that highlights its global circulation by arguing that the nation-state ceases to be the predominant container of collective memory. Instead, memories, like that of the Holocaust, transcend ethnic and cultural boundaries. While Levy and Sznajder’s argument that the Holocaust provides “the foundations for a new cosmopolitan memory” (88) seems at the same time euro- or western-centric and too optimistic concerning its outcome, it is certainly true that certain collective memories – that is above all traumatic memories, as the example of 9/11 illustrates – have become the object of transnational memory communities mainly due to the global circulation of media coverage, literature, films and other cultural products mainly made in the USA.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> I will use this phrase in the following since this expression sums up the struggle for attention it reflects.

<sup>20</sup> I will use Rothberg’s term in the following because it underlines the attempts at establishing a hierarchy of who suffered the most.

<sup>21</sup> Rothberg challenges Levy and Sznajder’s widely approved notion of the Holocaust as globally valid signifier because “[b]y overlooking Holocaust memory’s dialogic interactions with the legacies of colonialism, decolonization, racialization, and slavery, they not only simplify the history of Holocaust memory, they also end up producing a notion of morality that remains too singular and abstractly universal” (265).

Partly in line with Levy's and Sznajder's argument and responding to the omission of links between traumas in Caruth's approach, a discourse on the analysis of the depiction of memories in literature has been shaped by Rothberg ("Decolonizing"; *Multidirectional*), Stef Craps ("Linking Legacies"; and with Gert Buelens "Introduction") and partly by Geoffrey Hartman ("Trauma"). It focuses on the transhistorical and transcultural character of memories and the need to consider the interconnectedness of memories from different historical and cultural contexts thus questioning assumptions of incomparability and uniqueness put forward by the classic trauma discourse. Rothberg's study is worth considering in more detail since the novels in this study refer to it.

According to the concept Rothberg introduces in his study *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, memories are the result of transhistorical and transcultural processes of negotiation, referencing and borrowing, which always run in several directions between at least two bodies of memories and are thus multidirectional:

In "making the past present," recollections and representations of personal or political history inevitably mix multiple moments in time and multiple sites of remembrance; making the past present opens the doors of memory to intersecting pasts and undefined futures. Memory is thus structurally multidirectional . . . . (*Multidirectional* 35)

Rothberg demonstrates in his analysis of novels, theoretical texts, articles and films that, since the end of World War II, a tendency has existed in scientific and artistic discourses which assumed that linking different collective memories could launch productive processes of working through and mutual understanding. This discursive trend, which has hitherto been marginalized by scientific discourse, was most prominent between 1949 and 1961, since, on the one hand, it was during this period that events like the Eichmann trial (1961) and the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962) as well as the connected public discussions about torture and the massacre of Algerian protestors in Paris (1961) coincided with processes of working through the events of World War II. On the other hand, during this period, "the key terms that we use today to think about these events (the Holocaust, imperialism, decolonization) had not yet solidified into their familiar forms" (Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory* 107). Consequently, Rothberg proves his theory mainly giving examples from this period which link the Holocaust and decolonization, such as Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Aimé Césaire's *Discours sur le Colonialisme* (1950), Charlotte Delbo's *Les belles lettres* (1961), or William Gardner Smith's *The Stone Face* (1963). Rothberg then states that the marginalization of this discursive trend started in the middle of the 1960s due to the

“institutionalization of the Holocaust and colonialism as autonomous realms of history and discourse” (*Multidirectional* 267).

Rothberg places his concept of memory in the context of studies about collective rather than individual memory. Contrasting it with Freud’s concept of screen memory, which he classifies as a concept of individual memory, Rothberg defines multidirectional memory as “collective and historical” (*Multidirectional* 12) even though never completely separate from “individuals and their biographies” (*Multidirectional* 14). The main characteristic of multidirectional memories next to the juxtaposition of at least two collective memories is that they “[disrupt] everyday settings” (*Multidirectional* 14). Although the allusion to disruption, his special attention to metaphors of return, and the collective memories he analyzes in his study point to trauma, only in one chapter Rothberg explicitly identifies the memories he deals with as traumatic (“Rethinking Trauma with Césaire and Fanon”, *Multidirectional* 87ff).

Rothberg’s approach is of special significance for two reasons: First, it renders possible to comprehend the often inexplicable and intermittent emergence of traumatic memories. If memories are multidirectionally linked as Rothberg suggests, this explains why memories of traumatic experiences can be evoked by other events which seemingly have no bearings on them. He gives the example of the emergence of Holocaust memories in France evoked by reports on tortures during the Algerian War (*Multidirectional* 17). Second, it ties in with and pursues Caruth’s hope that “trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures” (“Trauma” 11). Although Rothberg emphasizes the positive potential of multidirectional memories, he does not succumb to a one-sided optimistic view but also admits that memory’s multidirectionality can be used to exclude alleged others or to incite violence rather than understanding and solidarity (*Multidirectional* 12).

The methodology Rothberg stipulates is rather vague: the aforementioned “connections” are “imaginative links between different histories and social groups” (*Multidirectional* 18).<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, Rothberg gives some concrete ideas of how to analyze multidirectional memories in literature and film when he elaborates that the aforementioned “imaginative links” form the substance of multidirectional memories and can be found on different levels: on the narratological

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<sup>22</sup> Rothberg’s term “imaginative links” evokes Édouard Glissant’s call for a poetics of relations (*une poétique de la Relation*) which, according to Glissant, as “un imaginaire” (Glissant 24) is the only possible way to comprehend the phases and implications the people of today’s world find themselves in (24).

level they are expressed, among others, by fragmented narratives and transnational settings. On the syntactic level, they can take the form of parallelisms, for example (*Multidirectional* 74). A stylistic device of special significance is intertextuality, which by definition links texts to each other and thereby produces additional meanings. Additionally, metaphors of return, like the boomerang, are considered by Rothberg as paradigmatic means of multidirectionality (*Multidirectional* 107). The aforementioned potential of multidirectional memory then develops, according to Rothberg, when texts open up to the global circulation of memories and thereby leave behind contests for attention and identity conflicts (*Multidirectional* 169). Rothberg gives no concrete explanation of how texts accomplish this opening, however.<sup>23</sup>

The Caruthian model cannot account for the juxtaposed representation of several traumas and the links between them. While this is my main point of criticism, Craps is the only critic who touches upon this problem, even if not regarding links between ‘western’ traumas, when he states that “they [the founding texts of the field (including Caruth’s own work)] generally disregard the connections between metropolitan and non-Western or minority traumas” (*Postcolonial* 2). One could argue that this shortfall derives from the close affinity between the Caruthian discourse, which insists on the unrepresentability of trauma and especially the Holocaust (Leys 268), and the discourse of uniqueness. However, even after more than ten years of criticism lavished on the trauma genre and figures like Caruth, the classical trauma discourse seems not to have lost its impact on American literature and culture since also the “new” post-9/11 culture draws on traditional modes of representing trauma by recurring to PTSD symptoms, for example, as my Magister thesis has shown. Since the authors criticizing the classic approach do not offer coherent new models, neither with regard to the analysis of trauma narratives in general (Craps et al. 908) nor considering the links between traumas, this study will propose two concepts that are usually not applied for the analysis of trauma representations, network theory and the spatial concept of psychogeography, to substantiate the analyses of *Let the Great World Spin* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. The text analyses of Campbell’s *What You Owe Me* and Krauss’ *Great House* will, however, draw on classic tools of literary analysis and will illustrate the continuing influence of Caruth’s assumptions on representations of trauma.

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<sup>23</sup> This might be the reason why Rothberg’s theory has had so little impact in the Humanities. Of all scholarly papers this paper refers to, only Brittany Hirth’s study makes use of Rothberg’s approach.

### 3. *What You Owe Me*

In this chapter, I will first quickly present the novel's structure and content, then give an overview of the collective historical traumas it includes. By giving examples of classic representations of trauma in the novel, the third subchapter illustrates what traces of the influence of the classic trauma discourse can be found in *What You Owe Me*. The subsequent chapter places the novel in the context of literary strands which broach similar topics. In subchapter five, I will give a close reading of the novel to elucidate how it links traumas and positions itself with regard to the Caruthian trauma discourse and discourses on uniqueness, hierarchies of suffering and contest of victims, respectively. This chapter applies classic tools of literary analysis and of trauma representations. Finally, I will sum up the most important findings of the close reading in a short concluding chapter.

#### 3.1. Introduction to the Novel

Campbell's novel *What You Owe Me* from 2001 covers roughly the years from 1948 to 2000. It is mainly set in Los Angeles and depicts how, in post-World War II Los Angeles, the Black woman Hosanna befriends the Polish Holocaust survivor Gilda and starts a small business with her producing cosmetics for Black women. The novel consists of 67 numbered but untitled chapters.

Based on its content and its narrative structure, the novel can be divided into three parts: The first part consists of chapters one to twelve and is marked by its choice of first-person narrative, the narrator being Hosanna. In this part, set at the end of the 1940s, Hosanna and Gilda meet at work in a hotel, Gilda being the only white<sup>24</sup> housemaid. Their friendship emanates partly from the similarities between their traumatic experiences: Hosanna and her family have suffered from racism against Blacks in the USA, Gilda was interned in a concentration camp and lost most members of her family during the Holocaust. The friendship comes to a sudden end when Gilda disappears because, as Hosanna finds out months later, her uncle forbade her to continue to see Hosanna. Hosanna is thus left behind struggling to make a living without her business partner Gilda and envying Gilda, who took the earnings of their business with her and has started her own cosmetics line. To be able to establish her own

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<sup>24</sup> I use here and in the following the term "white" despite its problematic foregrounding of an alleged skin color or race since the novel, too, uses it to refer to the non-Black or Mexican characters.

cosmetics business, Hosanna borrows money from the Black business man Mooney. Taking interest in her, Mooney teaches her everything she needs to know to run a business and boosts her self-esteem by insisting that she is beautiful. Hosanna realizes that most Black women hunger for compliments, so telling her clients that they are beautiful becomes her key to success. After being Mooney's lover for one year, Hosanna decides to marry her hometown boyfriend Lonell but the marriage breaks apart soon after their two daughters are born because Lonell cannot accept her business success. Interwoven in Hosanna's narrative is the story of her family, whose land in Texas was illegally seized by white landowners, and her brother Tuney, who refuses to accept racist structures and fights to become the first Black firefighter and to reclaim their family's land in Texas.

The second part of the novel depicts events starting in 1998 which circle mainly around Hosanna's daughters Matriece and Vonette. Vonette has resisted Hosanna's pushing and leads an apparently happy lower middle-class life with her husband and three children. Her son Tavares plays a role in the depiction of racism against Blacks in the 1990s as Matriece convinces her sister to send him to a better school in a white neighborhood. In this neighborhood he is arrested by the police for drug possession despite being innocent because two of his schoolmates blame him. In contrast to Vonette, Matriece has given in to her mother's aspirations: as head of a new line of cosmetic products for Black women she has stepped up the social ladder and become a successful business woman. She works for Gilda's cosmetics corporation waiting for the right moment to ask for compensation for the injustice inflicted on Hosanna. Besides Matriece's professional advancement, this part of the novel deals with the different ways in which the two women struggle with Hosanna's legacy and expectations as well as with familial conflicts. These subjects occur also in another plot line dealing with Gilda and her relationships to men and her children respectively. A third plot line is also dedicated to the relationship between parents and their children, this time presenting the struggle of the ex-convict Sam to rebuilt ties to his daughter, Asia, a Black star singer who suffers from the alienation of her former friends and community. This plotline is connected to the first since Matriece meets Asia, whom she has known since childhood when she used to babysit her, to convince her to become the spokesmodel for the cosmetics firm she works for. Asia's story contributes to the picture Campbell draws of racist structures and their lasting impact on Blacks. Despite her success, Asia suffers from depressions because she has lost contact to most of her friends. Her family is emblematic of the problems many Black families have to face: Since

her father was convicted, her mother forbade Asia to meet him, her brother is in prison, too, her mother and sister live off the money she gives them, and some of her mother's boyfriends abused her. Throughout the novel, Vonette and Matriece are visited with visions of their mother, who, even after her death, is filled with bitterness towards Gilda and always appears to be sad or dissatisfied with her daughters. The second part of the novel includes the chapters 12 to 66 which are characterized by a figural narrative situation. In these chapters the focalizers change frequently, but all characters which function as focalizers do so several times. Notably, focalizers include Black as well as white characters, female as well as male characters. With sixteen chapters Hosanna's daughter Matriece is most often the focalizer of the narrative and the only one from whose point of view several chapters in a row are presented (chapters 22 to 24). Other focalizers include Gilda, Tavares, Asia, and her father Sam.

The novel ends, after some background scheming by Hosanna's ex-lover Mooney, with Gilda selling part of her business at less than fair value to an association of Black business men who appoint Matriece chairwoman, and Hosanna finally finding peace. The third part of the novel consists of the final chapter of the novel (chapter 67) as well as of two short sections, one near the beginning of the first chapter and one at the end of the final chapter of the first part (chapter 11). This part, like the first, is rendered in first-person narrative from Hosanna's point of view, but it does not give a retrospective account of Hosanna's life. Instead, the reader learns that Hosanna is currently in heaven observing her daughter Matriece (Campbell 2). The narrative of this part differs from that of the two other parts, and thus from the depiction of events in which the focalizers were present, by the choice of present tense. The setting of this part underlines that Hosanna has adopted a more aloof perspective which becomes also clear when, in contrast to the first part of the novel, she summarizes and puts her achievements in the greater context of Black women's struggle for equal treatment by the beauty industry and for recognition of their own beauty:

My child liking what she sees reflected back at her is the good part. I fought for that, not just for her and her big sister, Vonette, but for all the sisters with hair that didn't ride their shoulders, with flaring nostrils that welcomed air. . . . I helped convince them that they were beautiful, and unchained their minds every bit as much as Malcolm X did. (Campbell 2)

In the final chapter of the novel (chapter 67), Hosanna looks down on the business meeting in which Gilda signs over her firm to Matriece. Hosanna's quasi omniscient point of view becomes obvious when she tells the reader what Mooney sees and feels while dying (468). The intermediate section of this part consists of one paragraph only which functions as a transition

between the first two parts of the novel. In this text passage, at the end of the first-person narrative from her point of view, Hosanna hands over the task of telling the story to her daughters: “The rest of the tale is for my girls to tell” (97). In the last two sentences of this part, Hosanna indicates which direction she wishes the forthcoming tale to take: “Closure is what I’m seeking. Death ain’t nothing but another opportunity” (97). Hosanna thus hints at her hope that her daughters will find a way to achieve what she always aspired to do and felt she was mulcted of by Gilda: owning her own cosmetics firm and becoming rich.

### 3.2. Collective Historical Traumas in *What You Owe Me*: Racism, Slavery and the Holocaust

*What You Owe Me* deals mainly with the collective historical traumas of slavery, racism against Blacks, and the Holocaust. Since in Campbell’s novel the representation of racism is inextricably interwoven with allusions to slavery, the two traumas are not considered separately in my analysis.

#### Racism and Slavery

The major collective historical trauma broached in Campbell’s novel is racism against Blacks. Racism is depicted in different shapes such as segregation, harassment, or job discrimination, and it is experienced by several characters. In *What You Owe Me*, racism is in most cases intricately linked to the collective historical trauma of slavery since the characters consider the racist structures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as deriving from this core trauma.

The instance of most overt racist practice depicted in *What You Owe Me* is the seizure of Hosanna’s family’s piece of land by the most powerful white family in her hometown Inez in Texas. According to Hosanna, the Hagertys raped her sister Lucille threatening to do the same to her mother if the family did not give up their land (Campbell 39). When Hosanna’s family refused, the Hagertys made sure that “[n]obody would give Daddy a decent price for his crops” and they “[b]urned down his lumber” (39). Since the Hagertys “owned most of the land and all the politicians” (5), they finally managed to accuse her father of failure to pay taxes and made him sign over his land to them. While Hosanna’s parents seem to have accepted their fate, Hosanna and her older brother Tuney are full of hatred (e.g. 26, 39, 44). Especially Tuney cannot accept the injustice done to his family. When they find out that the Hagertys have started drilling oil on their family’s land, he decides to get legal support to claim their land back, but racism hinders his efforts: He struggles to find a lawyer willing to represent him. In a big Los Angeles law firm, he and Hosanna are sent away because they are “colored” (93); later “two

colored lawyers laughed at him and declared that he'd never get the land back, that he might as well forget all about trying" (93). The robbery of the land is a frequent topic in the novel. Tuney is depicted as spending virtually his whole life fighting for the acceptance of his family's claim. The recurrence of the land robbery in the novel can be read as a literary reproduction of the way dissociated memories of traumatic events return again and again. The loss of the land is so traumatic to the family because, besides the economic consequences, the land also has a symbolic significance:

For almost three generations our family owned land right outside of Inez, Texas. My mama said my great-granddaddy saved the money from barbering. My daddy said he gambled and loan-sharked for it. One thing is for sure: nobody gave it to him. Because we had that land my mama and daddy were able to make their own living without having to hold out their hand to anybody. (39)

Like the trauma caused by its loss, the land has been handed down for generations. At the end of the 1940s, Hosanna states that the land had belonged to her family for almost three generations so one can deduce that her great-grandfather bought it soon after the abolition of slavery in Texas in 1865. Hosanna's emphasis on the fact that the land was legally bought and that it allowed her family to live free and independently, suggests that its significance stems from its being linked to the overcoming of slavery. Hosanna's explanation why she is enraged when she hears of the Hagertys producing oil on her family's land also alludes to slavery: "The Hagertys were going to be rich off the sweat of my ancestors" (44). In Hosanna's view, the white population uses its power position to increase its wealth at the cost of Blacks hence perpetuating the injustices done under slavery.

Another form of racism that has traumatic consequences for the characters is structural or everyday racism in US society during the whole time span the novel covers. Hosanna, for example, tells the reader that she is used to being exploited, mistreated and looked down on by white people: "We [Hosanna and her coworkers] traded fields for toilets, dirt under our nails for ammonia on our hands. Still had to say 'yessir,' 'yes ma'am.' Still had to live all together like lepers on roped-off acres that other people fled from as soon as they saw us coming" (3). Hosanna alludes to slavery-like working conditions in which only the type of "dirty" work has changed, but not that workers are treated as inferior. Moreover, she sketches a vivid image of the ghettoization taking place in big cities. The problems that spatial segregation pose to Blacks are hinted at again when Hosanna's mother feels the need to prepare food for her children's journey back to Los Angeles. Hosanna comments: "We'd have to drive a whole lot of segregated

miles before we reached Los Angeles, and my mother wanted to make sure that her children ate” (49). The impact of geographical segregation on Blacks becomes even clearer when Hosanna tries to find Gilda after she disappeared. When she drives into Gilda’s (white) neighborhood, she feels intimidated by being the only black person around and is scared off by ‘whites’ asking her whom she works for – the only acceptable explanation for a Black woman to spend time in a white part of town (82). Hosanna summarizes her experiences in the white neighborhood and the racism of Gilda’s family as follows: “We’d always glossed over the fact that I had to remain a secret in [Gilda’s] life. She could traverse my borders but I wasn’t allowed to cross hers” (79). Most forms of structural racism are depicted from Hosanna’s point of view. She faces active discrimination repeatedly: She is slighted by the bank employees when she and Gilda open a bank account (35), she has to wait outside when Gilda meets with their business partners (28), and she does not receive any credit after Gilda left the business since “[w]ithout a white partner, the business would be on a cash-only basis” (87). Hosanna also has to realize that even in states like California, which are more liberal in their treatment of Blacks than states of the south, Blacks do not receive business loans from white banks: “Los Angeles may not have been Mississippi, Louisiana, or Texas, but working capital was still out of reach” (89). Although Hosanna is used to those structural forms of racism, she is deeply hurt when she finds out that even Gilda, whom she considers her friend, thinks she is a cut above her because she is white. After Gilda admitted to her that she could not tell her uncle that she wanted to start a business with a Black woman, Hosanna suddenly understands why Gilda did not introduce her to her family. She wonders:

Me. Colored me. Was I so busy breathing in fantasy that I’d forgotten about reality? Here she was, my coworker, cleaning toilets and scrubbing floors, not even a citizen yet but way ahead of me. She didn’t have to climb up a twenty-foot ladder like some jungle monkey. . . . She hadn’t been in this country two minutes but already she’d learned that she was better than I was. (22)

The author uses here an image from the stock of stereotypes about Blacks, namely the monkey, as well as the image of the ladder to illustrate the liberal ideals of social advancement in US society and the different social statuses Hosanna and Gilda have reached or can reach due to their skin color rather than their efforts. Although Gilda is not even a citizen of the United States, she is considered superior to Hosanna, who is regarded as an uncivilized, animal-like creature because of her skin color.

At the end of the novel, after Gilda has signed over the cosmetics company to Matriece and Hosanna's dream has allegedly become true for Matriece, Hosanna expresses that her traumatization was indeed caused by the helplessness and powerlessness of being confronted by a whole superstructure of racist measures, assumptions and rules:

It was easier to be angry than to confront you, Gilda, easier to be angry with you than with an entire system. If I just concentrated on hating you, I didn't have to think about the Hagertys or the department stores that turned me down. . . . Hating you made up for everything" (467-68).

Hosanna explains here how Gilda came to stand in for all the structural racism she was unable to fight. She addresses Gilda from heaven hoping that this "confession" (468) will finally give her peace.

In *What You Owe Me*, the author also presents incidents of harassment or discriminatory practices against Blacks and other minorities committed by the police as being the rule: When the police ask Hosanna for a license for selling her lotion she wonders "if they wanted money or just a chance to harass [her]" (33). At this point, Hosanna's friend, who helps her to sell the lotion by driving her around, has already locked himself in the car since "[w]hen the LAPD came around was no time for a colored man to play hero. Black folks and Mexicans weren't safe around cops" (33). Hosanna's grandson Tavares learns the hard way that this discriminatory treatment is still common at the end of the 1990s when he and two white boys are stopped by the police. The white police officer readily believes the white boys' statement that the drugs in the car belong to Tavares although Tavares objects to this version of the events. Moreover, after having sent the white boys home, the officer arrests Tavares insulting him: "You little son of a bitch. You think you can come up here and sell drugs? You better think again" (370). This incident is telling in two ways: First, the officer does not believe Tavares, he insults him and presumes that he is a drug dealer. Second, the white boys riding with Tavares know that the white police officer will readily accept their lie.

Another example of structural racism running like a thread through *What You Owe Me* are employment policies and the fight for equal opportunities. At Hosanna's workplace, the hotel, it is an unwritten law that Black women do all the unpleasant work. It comes as a big surprise to the maids then that Gilda, a white woman, joins them to do the same work they do: "It wasn't every day we saw a white woman wearing what we wore, doing what we did" (1). Hosanna and the others soon realize, however, that Gilda is not regarded or treated as their equal by their boss. When it comes to particularly unpleasant or dangerous work, like cleaning

the chandeliers, Gilda is spared (16) and after some time she is even promoted to supervisor although all other maids have worked much longer at the hotel (41). For Hosanna, Gilda's promotion adds to her bitterness about processes she has learned to live with but resents nonetheless. Consequently, even though she knows that Gilda feels uncomfortable with her unwarranted promotion, she cannot completely conceal her disappointment:

I knew that Gilda hadn't asked for the job. . . . But seeing Gilda's pained expression didn't take the lumps out of the mess of grits I was trying to swallow.

After everyone cleared out Gilda said to me, "He picked me because I am white, yes?" she asked.

I was too angry to sugarcoat it for her. "That's right," I said. (41)

Even when Hosanna finally hands in her notice at the hotel – a day she had been looking forward to for a long time – her boss's racist attitudes destroy her high spirits and cause her to get fired. When she tells him that she will leave the hotel her boss does not ask her if she has found another job – a question he posed to Gilda. Hosanna thinks that Mr. Weinstock assumes that she will be working in menial jobs her whole life and thus sees no need to inquire: "Something told me that Mr. Weinstock was so sure that I was leaving one mop for another, so sure that my life was just going to be a series of floors to scrub and windows to wash that he didn't even need to ask me where I was going" (74). Mr. Weinstock's apparent disinterest and assumption that Hosanna will not climb up the social ladder in any way provoke Hosanna to tell him that she will start her own business and become rich. Hosanna's subsequent refusal to tell her boss with whom she plans on starting the business causes the boss to fire her. Whereas Hosanna tries to conquer her frustration about the little job opportunities she has as a Black woman by starting her own business, her brother Tuney wants to change the system from within. Throughout the novel, Tuney's ambitions are a recurring topic. Hosanna introduces her brother as influenced by his military service in World War II: "He had just made twenty and had memories of dancing with French women – a taste of freedom at a dangerous age" (5). Tuney, unlike their parents, does not accept the robbery of their land and has ambitious plans. He tells Hosanna: "Don't know what I'm gonna do, but I tell you one thing: People are going to sit up and take notice. They're going to know my name" (6). It soon becomes clear that Tuney is ready to stand a lot of discrimination and harassment to live up to his claim. Having tried to "get from behind a broom" (8) ever since they arrived in Los Angeles, Tuney finally manages to get a job in the aerospace industry. At his new job he engages in the fight against segregation. He tells Hosanna proudly that "he and the other Negroes at Fountain had begun using the same

bathrooms as everybody else” (25). Even though Tuney is enthusiastic about their success and the lack of resistance, Hosanna remains on guard: “I nodded, glad that the California Klan hadn’t rigged up a flaming cross for my brother and his colored coworkers” (25). Hosanna’s allusion to the Ku Klux Klan which, at the period when this part of the novel is set, was actively attacking Blacks in the southern states, situates the events of the novel in the context of violent racism in the United States. It thereby underlines the dangers Blacks, who were trying to overcome segregation and other racist measures, faced at that time. Nonetheless, Tuney’s ambitions are not satisfied with this “revolution” (25). When rumors spread that the local administration considers hiring “colored firemen” (40), Tuney wants to be the first. He sweeps aside Hosanna’s objections arguing that “[b]eing the first, well, it’s harder but once the hard part is over, [he]’d be more protected, and other opportunities will follow” (40). When Tuney becomes the first Black fireman in Los Angeles, Hosanna gives an account of the rigid racist barriers which he encounters at his new workplace and of the hardships he suffers stoically to fulfill his dream:

Tuney got his picture in the paper for being the first. Later, when the journalists went home, and the flashbulbs stopped popping, the old guard let him have it. For almost eight years he slept in a kind of shed behind the barracks. The other firemen wouldn’t eat with him. They urinated in his food and stole his uniform. They left him for dead in a world-record inferno that took out a city block on the east side. There were nights in that firehouse that he slept with a knife in his hand. But if they thought he was going to quit, they didn’t know my brother. (93)

In the second part of the novel, the author depicts several Black characters who avail themselves of the opportunities Hosanna, Tuney and many others of their generation had to fight for: Asia is a national star, Matriece is in a managerial position in a company owned by whites, Mooney and the family of Montgomery Briggs, Matriece’s boyfriend, own business imperia. In this part of the novel, there are no accounts of characters having to fight direct discrimination in the labor market. Nonetheless, the novel insinuates that Blacks continue to be disadvantaged in terms of education and economic security. An example of these aspects is the plotline of the young star singer Asia. Asia suffers from depression because she lost contact to her former friends and the community she grew up in and most of her male relatives are or were in prison. Her story illustrates how the racist structures, which over time have caused a disproportionately high number of Black prisoners and a disproportionately low number of

economically successful Blacks still influence the characters' lives.<sup>25</sup> The fact that Gilda deems it necessary to found an association to support minority entrepreneurs (249) underlines this aspect.

### The Holocaust

The second major collective historical trauma that *What You Owe Me* deals with is the Holocaust. Its appearances throughout the novel are mainly linked to Gilda. Although Gilda is depicted as restrained and cautious, she confides the story of her life bit by bit to Hosanna. Since Gilda's perspective is given only in the second third of the novel, it is from Hosanna's account that the reader learns that Gilda is the only member of her family who survived the persecution and internment in a death camp during World War II apart from an uncle who migrated to the United States before the war (Campbell 13). Her fiancé was shot by the Nazis when he insisted on being deported on the same train as Gilda (38). She is physically marked by the numbers tattooed on her arm (13) and experiments the Nazis conducted on her body (38–39). In one of the chapters in which Matriece is the focalizer and many decades have passed since the Second World War, Gilda tells her frankly: "When I arrived in this country I was a Jew who'd been hunted like a dog because I was different. I had numbers on my arm and a scar that almost divided me in half" (442). To deal with the psychological consequences of her experiences, Gilda goes to Holocaust survivor meetings at a Jewish community center (300). In the chapters in which Gilda is the focalizer, her traumatic past is a constant theme. She is haunted by the ghosts of her murdered family members (e.g. 157, 203). Outbursts of memory that are explicit about the events that haunt her are rare, however: "There were so many to mourn. . . . Everything came back to her: the smell of the gas, the moans of the dying, the frantic search for loved ones among the dead, the horror that never left her" (425).

Although explicit depictions of the Holocaust are almost completely missing from *What You Owe Me* in comparison to the many text passages dealing with the traumas of racism, the Holocaust trauma is explicitly referred to as a major traumatic experience that shapes Gilda's life and behavior to a great extent. The comparatively few explicit references can be explained by Gilda's admitted wish to repress those memories or even erase them completely and

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<sup>25</sup> Miles, for example, discusses the phenomenon "past-in-present-discrimination" that can explain the ongoing racist structures and individuals' suffering from them.

forever: “If only there was an operation that would erase her memory” (156). This argument is elaborated further below in the discussion of the symptoms of traumatization which serve the purpose of avoiding the reemergence of the traumatic experience.

In the following I will demonstrate that the author makes use of classic trauma symptoms to depict Gilda as traumatized. Moreover, I will also show that the characters suffering from less overtly traumatic experiences, in this case related to structural racism, display similar symptoms thus underlining the traumatic quality of their experiences.

### 3.3. Classic Representations of Trauma in *What You Owe Me*

In *What You Owe Me*, above all the two female main characters, who embody the major collective historical traumas of racism and the Holocaust, are attributed several classic trauma symptoms:

#### The Avoidance of Feelings

Gilda’s behavior suggests that she is in what in trauma discourse has become known as a robot state, a state characterized by the splitting of the ego into an observing part and the body. The behavior of afflicted persons is usually marked by torpor and hebetude (Bohleber, “Entwicklung”). Hosanna frequently remarks on Gilda’s apathy and lifelessness:

She seemed unconscious with her eyes open, as though she had sleepwalked her way into Our Room. (Campbell 4)

Gilda's eyes were the emptiest ones I had ever seen. (7)

It was the first time I knew that she still had a spark inside her, that her soul's light hadn't been completely extinguished by whatever she'd gone through. (9)

Another text passage gives Gilda’s perspective of the same period: “During the years right after the war, she walked with her head down and didn’t smile. . . . She wanted only numbness in those years when she was coming back to life. She feared that feeling would be too painful, like a scab ripped off too soon” (157). The reader learns here that Gilda avoids all feelings and all situations that might touch upon her painful memories. Moreover, Campbell’s choice of words in the last sentence is undoubtedly suggestive of trauma. The fear of pain when a scab goes off relates to the original Greek meaning of the word trauma, ‘wound’, and its analog psychological definition as a wound to the psyche.

### **Impossibility to Express the Traumatic Experience**

As it is typical of trauma victims, Gilda has troubles talking about the events which traumatized her. The difficulties to narrativize the traumatic experiences are a result of the destruction of primal trust, that is the trust in the existence of an emphatic other who cares, and the disruption of the net of meaning which are caused by the unexpectedness and the overwhelming force of traumatic experiences (Bohleber 821). Therefore, Hosanna – and thus the reader – knows very little about Gilda at first, namely only that she is a Polish Jew (Campbell 8-9). Gilda only opens up when another threatening and violent event triggers her memories: After one year of working together, Hosanna and Gilda witness an incident of child molestation and Gilda attacks the molester with a knife. Afterwards she confides enough in Hosanna to tell her that “the Germans rounded up her family and put them in the death camps and how everybody she loved – her mother, father, brother, aunts, uncles, grandparents – had been killed” (13). It takes Gilda even longer to tell Hosanna about two other events that lie at the core of her traumatization, namely that her boyfriend was shot by the Nazis and that her body was experimented upon in the concentration camp (38). In one of the chapters in which Gilda is the focalizer, it is explicitly stated that Gilda has not only difficulties confiding in her friend but also does not want to confide in her children: “How could she speak to them about her shaved head and all her tortured body had endured? She didn’t want their probing questions, their hows and whys and what ifs. She didn’t want their pity” (303).

### **Loss of Trust**

In the novel, the loss of trust caused by traumatization appears also in the form of loss of trust in one’s own safety and the reliability of others. Most Black characters feel constantly threatened by the white population and feel that they cannot trust them due to the experiences of discrimination, exploitation and deceit. Hosanna’s sister Lucille, for example, asks Hosanna, how she can trust a white woman when Hosanna tells her about her business with Gilda (Campbell 46). Mooney, too, is suspicious of Gilda. He cannot understand why Hosanna wants to go into business with a white woman and when he hears that Gilda is a Jew, he warns Hosanna not to rely on her: “You gotta watch them out both your eyes. They love money more than life” (67). Apart from the fact that Mooney, ironically, draws on racist stereotypes about Jews when alluding to money and avarice, the quotation again underlines the general suspicion Black characters in the novel feel towards white people. Even though Hosanna knows that “One way or another, straight through or around the bend, most of the

hard times in our lives had come from white folks" (3), she disregards all warnings. Gilda's disappearance destroys Hosanna's faith, however. She realizes: "I should have known better than to trust a cracker" (81).

### **Repression of Memories**

In Gilda's case, the impossibility of narrating the overwhelming experiences of her past is accompanied by the attempt to repress the terrible memories of the time in the death camps – a reaction typical of traumatized persons who consciously or unconsciously avoid the confrontation with hurtful and often debasing memories by dissociating or denying them (Bohleber 831). Consequently, Gilda does not only try to repress the memory of her traumatic experiences by avoiding to talk about them, she also refuses to read the letter by a Polish Holocaust survivor her daughter gives her as a birthday gift (Campbell 298-9) and to see a doctor to find out what the Nazis did to her body while she was narcotized (39). Hosanna knows that for Gilda, "[a]s long as she didn't know, it wasn't true" (40) but she cannot understand Gilda's attitude. For her, Gilda's voluntary ignorance is like "playing cards in the dark" (40). Nonetheless, Hosanna, too, represses unpleasant memories or avoids talking about them. She does not include the rape of her sister in her first account of the events leading to the loss of her family's land (5). It becomes obvious that Hosanna has repressed the memory of the rape or has difficulties speaking about it, both typical ways of dealing with traumatic memories, when she tells the reader that the memory of the rape is triggered by Gilda telling her about the experiments the Nazi doctors conducted on her body (39).

The fact that the memories of the loss of the land and the rape connected to them are painful to Hosanna becomes clear again when Tuney finally finds an – apparently Jewish – lawyer who is ready to take on his case. Hosanna does not share Tuney's enthusiasm and she realizes that she has given up the fight for her parents' land since she cannot bear this grief and the one Gilda caused her by disappearing (94). Again, Hosanna's behavior is typical of a trauma victim: she does not want to deal with the traumatic events, but she cannot let go of them. Tuney's attempts are of such importance to her that Hosanna gives a summary of them shortly before her death: "Over the years, Tuney went back and forth to Mr. Weiss's office so often it seems as if going there was his second job. I stopped accompanying him after a while. Just took too much out of me, especially after Mama and Daddy passed, and Lucille started acting so crazy, locking herself up in her room for days at a time" (96). Apart from the fact that Hosanna is tired of burdening herself with the futile law suit, it becomes clear in this passage that she

prefers avoiding everything connected to the robbery of the land since it reminds her of what the Hagertys did to her sister.

### **Being Haunted by Memories and Nightmares**

Just like Hosanna cannot let go of the memories of the painful events, Gilda's attempts at forgetting are not always successful. One text passage illustrates in particular that she is haunted by the repressed memories which return repeatedly and unexpectedly:

If only there was an operation that would erase her memory, a procedure that would dissolve the pain and misery that was stored there. She'd once thought that the years would free her, but the horrors of the past were still vivid. . . . German soldiers plagued her dreams. . . . sometimes all she could do was hold herself tightly and rock back and forth. Her memories came unbidden. (Campbell 156; other unexpected outbursts of memory: 243-4, 425)

Gilda's wish to "erase" the memories is a reaction to the unsuccessful attempt at suppression or denial. Her impression that the memories return "unbidden" repeatedly to "plague" her should be considered in the light of one of the core definitions of trauma as "the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge . . . and thus continually returns, in its exactness at a later time" (Caruth, *Trauma* 153). Gilda's strategies of coping with the traumatic memories, namely avoiding confrontation and narrativization of the traumatic experience, can be argued to have contributed to the return of the suppressed by averting the memories from becoming accepted as past and being integrated into the life after the event (Laub, "Truth" 64). The German soldiers are not the only memories that haunt Gilda though. Her dead relatives also appear again and again (Campbell 157; also 305, 402).

### **Survivor's Guilt**

It is in the reaction to the ghosts of her relatives that it first becomes obvious that Gilda is aware of the ongoing discussions about the psychological effects of the Holocaust on its victims as well as about the best ways to deal with them. When her dead relatives appear to her, she acknowledges that she suffers from survivor's guilt: "As she peered at them she wanted to apologize for having lived, for being stronger, for being blessed. Survivor's guilt, the therapists and support groups called it" (Campbell 157). What Campbell terms 'survivor's guilt' is a symptom of trauma that first received attention in the aftermath of the Holocaust and since then has been mainly used as a category of diagnosis for Holocaust survivors. It was introduced

by William Niederland as 'survivor' or 'concentration camp syndrome' (*Überlebenden-Syndrom*) in 1967 (Bohleber 812). Afflicted patients suffered next to already known syndromes of trauma, like chronic depression, severe sleeping disorders and nightmares, from indissoluble grief and a feeling of guilt for having survived (*Überlebensschuld*). For them, their survival was tantamount to a betrayal of the dead relatives (Bohleber 812). Consequently, Gilda forbids herself all enjoyments, "refused joy as if it were a bowl of food not to her liking" (Campbell 157). The above quoted statement by Gilda that she does not want the pity of her children (303) is also suggestive of the feeling of guilt she experiences for having survived. Since, in her view, she was lucky to be one of the few who did not get killed, she is not worthy of pity.

### References to the Classic Trauma Discourse

Near the end of the novel, the author situates Gilda unequivocally in the classic trauma discourse and especially in the discourse on the Holocaust. The reader learns that Gilda partakes in a Holocaust survivor group and that she suffers from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD):

Gilda was aware of what she was experiencing. Her support group had talked about the sudden emotional swings that could befall them without warning. Posttraumatic stress syndrome, or something like that. But understanding didn't deter the feeling that she was sinking and couldn't save herself (Campbell 425).

Like the concept of survivor's guilt, the survivor groups and the much-contested diagnosis category PTSD had become customary ways of treating survivors of the Holocaust in the US in the 1990s, when this part of the novel takes place. It is important to note that in this passage Gilda explicitly identifies herself as traumatized by admitting that she suffers from PTSD and thus classifying herself according to publicly accepted trauma terminology. By showing that Gilda knows everything about possible symptoms of her traumatization but is nevertheless not able to overcome them, Campbell, on the one hand, emphasizes that Gilda suffers from such a strong traumatization that even more than fifty years after the traumatic events of the Holocaust her life is still influenced by its impact. On the other hand, the eligibility and the benefits of categories such as survivor's guilt and PTSD as well as of the type of therapy being based upon them are put into question since, at least in Gilda's case, they do not seem to contribute to her healing.

Hosanna, too, refers to concepts from the classic trauma discourse in her explanation of Lucille's behavior after she was raped by the Hagertys. When Hosanna goes to Texas to see her

family for the first time since she moved to Los Angeles, Lucille is described as follows: “Lucille was like a porcelain vase that somebody had shattered; she was glued back together, but I could still see the cracks” (Campbell 45). In this text passage, Campbell emphasizes Lucille’s traumatization by employing “shattered,” a term which in the classic psychological trauma discourse is used to describe the effects of traumatic experiences on the apparatus of perception. The apparatus, which usually functions as a shield against overstimulation, is shattered by the sudden force of the traumatic event which can lead to changes and distortions of perception (Bohleber 827). In the following, Lucille’s behavior is described in more drastic terms: “Lucille started acting so crazy, locking herself up in her room for days at a time” (Campbell 96). Recalling the beginnings of psychological trauma studies and their analysis of female hysteria, which was considered to be linked to sexuality, Campbell presents going crazy as a normal reaction to trauma, possibly provoked by the feeling of helplessness trauma can trigger. Consequently, also Hosanna is afraid of going crazy. When Tuney tells her that the Hagertys have started drilling oil on their family’s land, she responds to the news by feeling sick. Her only way out is to imagine that she will be rich one day and take revenge on the Hagertys. She is aware that this is a “pipe dream” (26) to conquer her helplessness but “it sustained [her] and kept [her] from going crazy” (26).

Gilda is the character most unequivocally marked as traumatized, in the text passages in which Hosanna remembers her as well as in those in which Gilda is the focalizer of the narrative. In contrast to Gilda, the Black characters rarely identify themselves explicitly as traumatized, but their behavior reveals the wounds caused by constant exposure to racism and discrimination as well as the ongoing impact of slavery. The difference in the types and number of symptoms the Jewish and the Black characters display can be considered a parallel to the presence or absence of direct depictions of the respective traumas. Gilda’s symptoms reflect mainly her attempts at repression whereas Hosanna’s loss of trust can be traced back to the systemic nature of her traumatization.

### **3.4. *What You Owe Me* – The Juxtaposition of Traumas Embraced by Popular Black Women’s Fiction**

Due to its themes, the way characters are presented, and to its stylistic choices, which include first-person narrative, changing perspectives and circular narrative, *What You Owe Me* can be considered a trauma novel. Its focus on Black characters and the relationship between

a Jewish and an Black character situate the novel also in two other literary traditions, as I will discuss in the following.

### Trauma Novel

The tripartite structure of the novel and the differing forms of narrative underline the novel's main themes and contribute to its functioning as trauma narrative. Rendering the events that shaped Hosanna's life in first-person narrative is a reference to the strand of trauma literature which has become known as testimony. Even if *What You Owe Me* is not a typical testimonial text in the sense Felman and Laub, for example, define it, the main character hopes that telling the story of the injustices done to her family has a curative function. She expects to find peace after having admitted her grudges against Gilda and her suffering from racism (Campbell 468-69). The assumption that externalizing the suffered events in a narrative is a way of working through is typical of trauma narratives. In the two 9/11-novels *Falling Man* by Don DeLillo and *The Writing on the Wall* by Lynn Sharon Schwartz, for example, the characters' struggle to put their traumatic memories into words is depicted as an important step in overcoming their traumatization. Consequently, some analyses of trauma texts also focus on the role of giving testimony and its ethical implications, like Kaplan's analysis of memoirs and films depicting trauma, or Laub's ("Truth") more general study of the different forms of testimony and witnessing possible after traumatization. Hosanna's "confession" can be regarded as a testimony since she confronts the painful memories she has suppressed and manages to form a coherent narrative about the origins of her pain, namely the racist structures she had to face all her life. Furthermore, at least in this last section of the novel, she directly addresses Gilda, thus turning her into "a co-owner of the traumatic event" (Felman and Laub 57).

The transition from first-person narrative to third-person narrative and back underlines the central position of Hosanna's experiences and highlights the transgenerational transmission of trauma by presenting the impact Hosanna's traumatization has on her daughters' lives, not from Hosanna's point of view but in a figural narrative situation. The alternation of points of view allows for insights into Gilda's thoughts and feelings, it shows the triggers and impact of her traumatization. The return to Hosanna's first-person narrative furthermore echoes the cyclical structure of traumatic memory.

## Popular Black Women's Fiction

There are several underlying themes in *What You Owe Me*: Besides the relationship between Black Americans and American Jews, the question of Black and female entrepreneurship and the recognition of the special demands of Black women concerning beauty products play an important role. Campbell thus covers several subjects which Robin V. Smiles identifies as typical of "popular black women's fiction" (347):

The newer writers are more likely to imagine contemporary settings; stories of women moving away from their communities to the suburbs or to the West Coast who are thus isolated and separated from family; unsatisfying and disappointing relationships with black men; an exploration of the possibilities and problems of being single; and the element of intraracial strife perpetuated by economic and class distinctions. (348)

All of the aforementioned characteristics apply to *What You Owe Me*: Hosanna moves from Texas to Los Angeles "looking for better times" (Campbell 3) leaving her family behind. In Los Angeles, she moves from an affair with the married Mooney to a marriage with her childhood sweetheart Lonell. While being "Mooney's 'woman on the side'" (92) gnaws at Hosanna's conscience, it is at least intellectually satisfying and boosts her self-esteem (92). Her marriage with Lonell, in contrast, is a disappointment and lasts only some years:

Lonell turned out to be puffed up with air, not ambition. Everything he touched turned to dust. . . .

Lonell seemed to resent my little bit of success and anybody else's. . . . We hung on until right after Kennedy got killed. . . . We split up Inez-style: Lonell just walked out without signing the paper first. (94–95)

The text passages illustrate also another characteristic of Black women's fiction suggested by Smiles, an economic role reversal in marriage in which "the female character brings wealth and economic status to the union" (Smiles 356). Lonell is described as failing at professional and economic advancement, and, moreover, being incapable of handling Hosanna's economic success. What Smiles terms "the possibilities and problems of being single" (348) Campbell shows in Hosanna's struggle to keep her business running while taking care of two children but also in her depiction of Matriece. Matriece is a successful business woman but has troubles committing herself to a relationship. Since "Hosanna had warned her and her sister about becoming too dependent on a man" (Campbell 121), Matriece breaks up with her boyfriend when she realizes that she likes him (197) although she is afraid of feeling lonely. Matriece can also be cited as an example of the intraracial strife for upward mobility Smiles mentions. Benefitting from an extensive education financed by Mooney (102), she is in constant conflict

with her family and the loyalty to her social roots. This conflict becomes obvious in the bad conscience Matriece has because she left her old job with a Black cosmetics firm to work for one of the “white-owned companies” (104). Moreover, Matriece’s urge to send her nephew to a school in a white part of Los Angeles to improve his prospects (“Tavares was going to have more options. He was going to be somebody.” (176)) causes resentments between her and her sister. The topic of Blacks becoming economically successful and losing contact to their family and home community is generally a recurring theme in the novel. Vonette expresses her worries that her son Tavares’s going to a school in a white rich neighborhood might alienate him:

If Tavares gets so high and mighty, where does that leave our family? How do we fit into his life when he’s making tons of money and married to some white girl, huh? My children love each other. . . . I don’t want them to wind up not connected like you [Matriece] and me (279).

Smiles explicitly mentions Campbell as one of the authors to whom she alludes, even though she does not cite this exact novel (347). She states that popular black women’s fiction as a subgenre of Black literature has mostly been excluded from the canon and that its literary value has been belittled due to its commercial success (Smiles 347–348). This might also be the reason why there is, apart from some interviews with the author, no secondary literature on *What You Owe Me*.

### **“Facing” Black American and Jewish Traumatic Experiences**

Campbell’s novel can certainly be labeled “popular black women’s fiction”. However, it also belongs to a marginal literary tradition which “enacts a ‘facing’” (Zierler 46) of the Holocaust and Blacks’ experience of slavery and racism. On the international level, this tradition is represented by André Schwartz-Bart’s novel *Le Dernier des justes* (1959), and Caryl Phillips’ *The Nature of Blood* (1997), for instance; US-American representatives are Edward Lewis Wallant’s *The Pawnbroker* of 1961 (Zierler 48), and John Edgar Wideman’s *Philadelphia Fire* of 1985 (Gyssels 250). A special case in this context is Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* (1987) and the public debates which surrounded it. The content of the novel does not link the traumatic experiences of Blacks and Jews but concentrates on the trauma of slavery. Its inscription “*Sixty Million and More*” has caused much controversy (Zierler 46–47), though. Since the inscription implies that slavery killed ten times more people than the Holocaust, sixty vs. six million victims, *Beloved* can be seen as a novel by and about Blacks taking part in the ‘contest of victimization’.

Moreover, the novel fueled the debate about the incomparability of the Holocaust. As I will show in the following, Campbell is aware of this contest and broaches it in her novel.

Studies of the literary juxtaposition of the Holocaust and Black experiences are scarce. Next to Rothberg, only Kathleen Gyssels and Wendy Zierler explicitly deal with works which juxtapose the Holocaust and Black experiences of racism and slavery. Other studies, such as those by Eric J. Sundquist and Adam Z. Newton, analyze literary works by Jews and by Blacks with regard to relations between them.<sup>26</sup> The works of this literary strand can be considered expression of the special relationship that used to link Blacks and American Jews during at least the first half of the twentieth century. Sundquist states that this relationship was based on “the importance of blacks for Jews and Jews for blacks in conceiving of themselves as Americans, when both remained outsiders to the rights and privileges of full citizenship” (1). Their shared status as outsiders or underprivileged citizens motivated Blacks and Jews temporarily to band together to fight for recognition and equal rights (2). According to Sundquist, the cooperation of the two groups started to come undone when the Jewish American population “embarked on a rapid ascent of the social and economic ladder, while African Americans, however much their lives were improved by the downfall of segregation, began an ascent destined to be far slower and more erratic” (4). Campbell traces this development in the relationship between Blacks and Jewish Americans, or Jewish immigrants to the US respectively, in *What You Owe Me*. By starting their own business, Hosanna and Gilda as representatives of the two groups join forces in the post-World-War-II years to improve their economic situation and to attain at least some independence and agency. At the beginning of the novel, that is at the end of the 1940s and at the beginning of the 1950s, Gilda and Hosanna feel connected by what Sundquist terms “day-to-day communal experiences” (2). These communal experiences include, for example, the exploitation at the hotel. Despite “the structural similarity between blacks and Jews at the end of World War II” (4), Hosanna’s and Gilda’s alliance is broken apart by Gilda’s uncle, who does not approve of her relationship with a Black woman (Campbell 83). The fact that Gilda and Hosanna do not renew their friendship, even after Gilda has become more independent of her family, can be explained by the processes Sundquist describes: Gilda has come to realize that the partnership with Hosanna will block her economic and social

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<sup>26</sup> For a list of studies dealing with this special relationship see Newton (175) or Sundquist (529-30).

advancement and therefore does not try to get in contact with her (442–43). Hosanna, on the other hand, can be considered an example of the “slow and more erratic” ascent of Blacks after the end of segregation. It is surely not by accident that Hosanna’s summary of the years after Gilda left her is contextualized historically:

All around us, colored people were trading backseats for those up front, exchanging segregation for integration. (94)

I wasn’t rich but I had my products in beauty salons all across the country and was hoping to get them into department stores. (95)

In these text passages Hosanna is presented as a rather successful business woman against the background of the slow resolve of segregation. Hosanna’s subsequent musings make clear, however, that Gilda has become much richer and that she had to struggle with far less obstacles during her economic ascent:

[O]ne day when I was browsing in Broadman’s, a really nice department store, I saw an entire line of Gilda Cosmetics in a display case, and I thought I’d just go up in smoke right there. The buyers at Broadman’s had refused to meet with me. (96)

America loved her better. All she had to do was spread her wings and fly. She got more out of being here than I did, and she hadn’t been here as long or worked as hard. When I was dragging my girls around to beauty salons in a car that was louder than Vonette’s grumbling, sometimes I’d think about her sitting pretty someplace, having everything. (97)

Both quotations show that, at least in Hosanna’s opinion, she never had the same opportunities as Gilda because she was not white. The access to the apparently white owned department store is blocked for her products and whereas she has to struggle with door-to-door sale while taking care of her children, Gilda’s success has come easily. The depiction of Gilda’s success as effortless certainly has to be treated with caution since it forms part of Hosanna’s subjective narrative. However, the first chapter in which Gilda is the focalizer supports Hosanna’s depiction. The reader learns that “Gilda had long grown accustomed to suites like the one she was presently enjoying” (154), a suite costing 4000 dollars a day (155).

Conclusively, due to its themes, style and the ways in which characters are presented as traumatized, *What You Owe Me* is a classic trauma novel. The themes linked to the Black characters in the novel, such as unstable marriages, economic advancement and alienation from social roots, as well as its exclusion from literary studies, suggest that *What You Owe Me* forms part of the literary subgenre popular black women’s fiction. Its preoccupation with the relationship between a Black American and a Jewish Holocaust survivor situates the novel above all in a marginal but significant literary genre which juxtaposes the (traumatic)

experiences of those two groups. The fact that *What You Owe Me*, although only published in August 2001, was *Los Angeles Times* “Best Book of 2001” and a *New York Times* Bestseller underlines that the juxtaposition of slavery and racism with the Holocaust hit a nerve in the United States in 2001, perhaps not coincidentally in the year of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. Even though it was written before 9/11, the fact that post-9/11 US-readership embraced this novel can be argued to reflect a growing concern with the representation of collective historical traumas as not separate but linked. The big commercial success of the novel, moreover, challenges the marginality of the discourse that juxtaposes Black and Jewish experiences in scholarship. With its merged trauma novel and popular Black women’s fiction approach, Campbell’s novel arguably paved the way for subsequent juxtaposing representations of 9/11 and other traumas, and attests to the fact that post-9/11 US-readership was open to a novel critical of classic trauma discourses that insist on the singularity and incomparability of a specific collective trauma. The strategies which Campbell uses to link traumas and to challenge the classic trauma discourse will be elucidated in the following chapter.

### 3.5. Comparing Traumas and the Contest of Victims in *What You Owe Me*

There are people in this life who believe that being the biggest victim will get them the best pork chop at the dinner table. (Campbell 5)

In *What You Owe Me*, the author establishes connections between the collective historical traumas of racism and the Holocaust by comparing them, making use of metaphors and intertextuality, carving out thematic similarities in strategies of coping, and applying specific trauma concepts. In addition, the contest of victims is the subject of a meta-discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of the juxtaposition of collective historical traumas.

#### 3.5.1. Comparing Traumas

Tying in with the novel’s explicit dealing with traumas, Gilda’s and Hosanna’s traumatic experiences are in several instances explicitly compared. When Hosanna tells Gilda about her home town Inez in Texas, “Gilda said it was another kind of death camp, that the poison gas came out in spurts, not enough to kill the body, just the soul” (Campbell 14). Campbell uses analogy in this passage to present Inez as a variant of the death camps established by the Nazis – a statement surprising in its directness with regard to the uniqueness discourse but also

positioning the novel in relation to Morrison's *Beloved*. A second instance of comparison is Hosanna's realization that she "wasn't used to white folks treating each other as badly as they treated us" (18) when Gilda tells her about the money of her family she cannot claim. The comparison is a double one here: On the one hand, both Gilda and Hosanna are victims of "white folks". On the other hand, both their families suffer a similar injustice by being deprived of what is legally and provably theirs. Gilda is not allowed to access the money her family hid from the Nazis in a Swiss bank account although she owns a bank book proving her entitlement;<sup>27</sup> Hosanna's family cannot claim their land although they have a deed proving that it legally belongs to them. The author extends the parallel by having her characters react similarly to the unjust treatment:

"One day they will pay," she [Gilda] said simply.  
 "That's what my brother says about the people who stole our land." (18)

Both Gilda and Hosanna's family, here represented by Hosanna's brother, are seeking revenge and hope for compensation. Campbell suggests an important connection between these two cases of disappropriation by returning to them near the end of the novel. Matriece reads a newspaper from which two articles are mentioned: One "talked about how several international organizations had waged a long legal battle on behalf of the [Holocaust] victims and their descendants" (454) and finally accomplished a settlement with the Swiss banks. The other article is about Tuney "spearheading a class-action suit" (454) against the Hagertys. In this text passage, the two cases are thus again juxtaposed and thereby the parallels are highlighted.

Whereas the legal battles underline the similarities of the struggles for compensation Gilda and Hosanna's family have to face, another subtler comparison emphasizes commonalities between the statuses of Jewish and Blacks and their divergent development over the years. Close to the end of the novel, after Matriece revealed to Gilda that she is Hosanna's daughter, the latter tries to explain her disappearance:

"When I arrived in this country I was a Jew who'd been hunted like a dog because I was different. I had numbers on my arm and a scar that almost divided me in half. You can't

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<sup>27</sup> Somewhat ironically, Gilda and her uncle do the same thing to Hosanna: When they close the bank account of Gilda's and Hosanna's firm, Hosanna is left behind with a check worth nothing (Campbell 84) and a contract that proves their business partnership (313) but is of no use in fighting an injustice done by a 'white' person – at least not legally and during Hosanna's life time.

imagine how seductive the thought of acceptance was, even just a little, to someone like me.” Her eyes met Matriece’s. “Of course you can. Here, in the beginning, I couldn’t join the country clubs, and only so many of us were allowed in the best universities, but if I spoke English without an accent, if I shortened my last name and made no mention of the death camps, they let me in most other places. . . . Black people in this country had to suffer, and if I chose to be with one I would suffer as well. And, my dear, I had suffered enough. I could be white if I separated from your mother” (442–43).

Gilda’s explanation establishes a clear parallel between the experiences of discrimination of European Jews and those of Blacks in the 1940s. Gilda alludes here to the fact that Jews, too, used to be discriminated against and were not considered white in the USA.<sup>28</sup> For Gilda, becoming white is the only way to be accepted and live a happy life in the USA.<sup>29</sup> To do so, she has to erase all signs of her foreignness, keep silent about her traumatic past – at least at that point in time, that is the 1950s – and set herself apart from those who are treated badly and not regarded equal by the white majority population. Being excluded from country clubs and higher education are two examples because of which “Jews and blacks once found that their day-to-day communal experiences were as intimately connected as their histories were distinct” (Sundquist 2). Gilda’s realization that Matriece, as a Black woman, can at the turn of the century still understand perfectly what it feels like to be excluded from the normative parts of society points to the fact that this is still a common experience for US-Blacks. For Gilda, and arguably all US-American Jews at the turn of the century, discrimination and the need to become white are experiences of the past as her use of past tense and “in the beginning” implies. Campbell’s depiction of the relationship between Blacks and US-Jews, which was based on shared experiences of discrimination, but dissolved with the growing inclusion of Jews into the white population, thus reflects its “serious erosion over the last half of the twentieth century” detected by Sundquist (4).

Mooney, the Black business man with whom Hosanna has a love affair, also assumes parallels between the fate of Jews and Blacks but insists especially on a difference, the diverging relationships the two groups have to the perpetrators. When Matriece tells him that she starts liking Gilda, Mooney chastises her:

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<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, Hosanna, who suffered from racist discrimination all her life, resorts to racist stereotypes about Jews, when Gilda disappears: “Didn’t everybody get ‘jewed’ out of money some time? Wasn’t every storekeeper a cheap Jew? Now I had my very own no-good dirty Jew story about the woman who stole from me” (Campbell 81).

<sup>29</sup> The paradox that Jews can ‘pass as white’ because of their complexion but are not considered ‘white’ by racial ideology is discussed by Susan Arndt, for instance.

We are such an emotional people, and it trips us up every time. We forgive everydamnbody. George Wallace say [sic] he's sorry, and we fall all over ourselves voting for him. . . . You think Jews forgave Hitler? You think they go to Germany for vacation and spend their money there? (Campbell 258–59).

Mooney makes clear that the relation of “we”, namely Blacks, to white Americans should be similar to that of Jews to the Nazis or to the Germans. He thereby suggests that in both cases there is a clear-cut victim-perpetrator-relationship which should bar the victims from feeling sympathy for their perpetrators. Nonetheless, according to Mooney, the positions of victim and perpetrator are the only similarities since Blacks, unlike Jews, readily forgive past injustices and crimes whenever white Americans pretend to do them good.

### 3.5.2. Beauty as Thematic Link between Traumas

Cosmetics and beauty are a recurring topic in *What You Owe Me*. At first sight, this topic underscores the novel's categorization as popular and, particularly, women's fiction. The destruction and denial of beauty as well as attempts to restore it are, however, also an element linking the collective historical traumas of the Holocaust and racism against Blacks. The novel depicts Gilda as suffering immensely from the scar on her womb (Campbell 38–39), her bad teeth (14), and the numbers tattooed to her arm (13) which all derive from her internment in the Nazi death camp. These marks influence her behavior to such an extent that she never smiles, never sees a doctor or goes out with a man, and always wears long sleeves. In an unexpected outburst Gilda, who by then owns a big cosmetics company, tells her assistant that

It's so strange that I sell beauty. For so many years in my life there was no beauty. Like a blackout. . . . It is shocking what a shaved head does to beauty. Brown teeth, rotten teeth, missing teeth, they take away good looks. . . . Oh, my dear, I saw so many people lose their beauty (244–45).

From Gilda's obsession with plastic surgery (155) and her recovery after Hosanna took her to a dentist and a tattoo parlor (14), it becomes clear that restoring her beauty is an essential step for Gilda in leaving the traumatic experience of the Nazi camp behind. Her involvement in the beauty industry is thus not surprising. Even less so considering that it was her lotion (18), self-made on a recipe she inherited from her family who owned a cosmetics factory before the war, that started Hosanna's and her business.

The female<sup>30</sup> Black characters in *What You Owe Me* suffer not so much from the loss of their beauty but from century-long stigmatization, denial of black beauty, and being slighted by a beauty industry catering to white women. In the 1950s, Hosanna recognizes the bad self-perception of Black women and the mean quality of beauty products made for them and builds her business on these two factors. Hosanna's lover Mooney tells her repeatedly that she is beautiful and she decides to tell her clients the same "because I knew they were as hungry for those words as I was" (92). Selling her products from door to door, she tries "to convince my sisters of what I was just beginning to believe: We were already beautiful. All we needed was a little enhancement" (94). Hosanna considers boosting Blacks' self-esteem her biggest achievement, an achievement that she sees in line with the fight of the equal rights movement: "I helped convince them that they were beautiful, unchained their minds every bit as much as Malcolm X did" (2). Hosanna's efforts are hence presented as part of the 1960s movement under the slogan "Black is beautiful", but her enthusiasm about the improvement of the lives and self-esteem of Black women is challenged in the novel by the following generation's perception of themselves and others. Asia, the star singer, does not like her appearance, especially her flat nose and big cheek bones although she is frequently complimented on her beauty (123–25). Asia thus singles those parts of her body out that have been used since slavery for othering Blacks, the othering causing unhappiness with features allegedly typical of Blacks and the low self-esteem which Hosanna tries to fight in the novel. The novel gives one reason for Asia's discomfort with her features and thereby underlines the ongoing racist perception of Black women: Asia's stating her unhappiness with her features is followed by the remark that "*Vogue* proclaimed her this season's exotic beauty" (125). For mainstream culture at the turn of the century, Asia is hence still "exotic", a term evoking Hosanna's characterization as "some jungle monkey" (22). By contrast, Asia seems to meet the idea of beauty of Black women. Matriece finds her perfect for becoming the spokesmodel of her cosmetics line:

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<sup>30</sup> Beauty as thematic link between traumas and its significance for empowerment summons up a subtext of gender relations and the intersectional discrimination Black women in particular had to face. Matriece is aware that Hosanna was a woman "who didn't get what she wanted out of life because she was born the wrong color and wrong gender at the wrong time" (Campbell 458). Due to its high complexity and its diverging impact on 'white' and Black women, it is not possible to analyze this additional aspect of intersectional discrimination in the realm of this study. Furthermore, the analysis of this aspect would not produce findings relevant for the main aim of this study. For a discussion of the phenomenon of intersectional discrimination of Black women in the US see Kimberle Crenshaw's article.

Close up, Matriece could see how truly extraordinary-looking Asia was. Hers was a face that epitomized black beauty, . . . but wasn't 'too' light. . . . She had the skin color of a white girl's dream tan, a skin tone that the masses of black women looking for beauty could identify with (168).

It is noteworthy that also in this text passage the beauty ideals of white women function as a point of reference. Even though Matriece looks for a spokesmodel who is not "'too' light" so her Black clients can identify with her, the fact that Asia has "the skin color of a white girl's dream tan" suggests that she is also light enough to look attractive to white people. One can hence read Matriece's professional assessment as expressing the ongoing need to be as white as possible to please both groups. A comment by Asia's trainer underlines that becoming white is still promising for Blacks' lives and careers: "You start out black, become white" (129). This comment insinuates that Asia's success is paralleled or even caused by her becoming white. Becoming or at least appearing white is thus a topic running like a thread through the novel and linking the traumas of the Holocaust and racism. Gilda's description of how to become white as a Polish Jew in America is mirrored by Hosanna's being accused by her coworkers of trying to become white when she becomes friends with Gilda and starts improving her language (15,22), and Matriece's assessment of Asia's looks. Whereas the discrimination of Jews has long ceased, *What You Owe Me's* dealing with ideas of beauty draws attention to the fact that Blacks at the turn of the century still have to consider passing as white, which for several centuries was the only possibility to live freely (under slavery) or to become economically successful (after the abolition of slavery).<sup>31</sup>

The notions that denying beauty can contribute to traumatization and that restoring beauty is a way to overcome traumatization, stigmatization, and discrimination is hence another element that links the traumas of the Holocaust and racism, or slavery, respectively. This notion is illustrated by the book cover of *What You Owe Me* which shows two interlocking hands. One of the hands is 'black' and one white, both are manicured and wear nail polish. Beauty as a way of empowerment and thus a link between the two characters symbolizing the traumas of the Holocaust and racism against Blacks is here symbolized by the manicured, interlocking hands.

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<sup>31</sup> Davis, for instance, gives examples of people passing as or refusing to pass as 'white' (52).

### 3.5.3. Literary Strategies of Connecting Traumas

#### Intertextuality

Campbell uses intertextuality as a literary strategy to establish a connection between the fate of Black Americans and Jews. In the second to last sentence of the novel Hosanna declares: “My daughters are wise women, who already know what it took me too long to learn: There is a balm in Gilead” (Campbell 469). The phrase “there is a balm in Gilead” refers, on the one hand, to a traditional Black spiritual, going back at least to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this spiritual the phrase is part of the chorus:

There is a balm in Gilead  
To make the wounded whole,  
There is a balm in Gilead  
To heal the sin-sick soul. (Erskine Peters 53)

The chorus illustrates that the spiritual deals with the healing of wounds, and of wounds to the soul in particular. Since historically spirituals, as part of religious life, played a significant role for Blacks in dealing with the hopeless and violent everyday life under slavery, and also later under the Jim Crow segregation laws, Campbell’s quotation from this spiritual can be read as a reference to the marks slavery and racism left on the souls of Blacks. Moreover, the wording of the spiritual is evocative of trauma since ‘trauma’ is Greek for ‘wound’. On the other hand, the phrase “there is a balm in Gilead” refers to the Old Testament, and thus to the Hebrew bible. In Jeremiah 8:22 the balm of Gilead is presented as a spiritual medicine that is able to heal Israel. With the intertextual reference to this spiritual, Campbell points to the fact that Black culture has long been linked to and influenced by Jewish spiritual traditions (Erskine Peters xviii). Erskine Peters states that spirituals like *Balm in Gilead* are “a testament of faith to the transforming power of the spirit. They speak of the healing potion and the agents available to those who have undergone and withstood the insufferable” (51). The fact that the author chose *Balm in Gilead* as a reference points out the common cultural heritage of Blacks and Jews on which they rely to deal with their histories of suffering. The intertextual reference to yet another spiritual, *Daniel in the Lion’s Den* (Campbell 81), supports this argument. Peters categorizes this spiritual, which again refers to a story from the Hebrew Bible<sup>32</sup>, as one of

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<sup>32</sup> Daniel 6:16

deliverance (Erskine Peters 160) and explicitly mentions a line which invokes the crematoria of the Holocaust, even though the song must have existed long before the 1940s<sup>33</sup>: “Oh-o Lord, three Hebrew children in the fiery furnace” (161). The line is followed by a call for help addressed to God. The reference to this spiritual thus also establishes a connection between Jewish and Black cultures and between experiences of suffering while at the same time hinting at the possibility of deliverance. Hosanna’s introductory remark that her daughters know that “there is a balm in Gilead” can be interpreted as expressing her hope that her daughters are aware of the comparable experiences of Blacks and Jews and that both groups long for remedy for their suffering.

### Metaphors

The second literary strategy Campbell applies to link the traumas of the Holocaust and racism, or slavery respectively, are metaphors. The last two paragraphs of the novel, narrated by Hosanna, are central in this regard:

I imagine that Poland is still cold in the spring. There are places – never to be forgotten – where no flowers grow. Disco music blares over old graves, but the spirits refuse to dance. . . .

In Texas butterflies float on April breezes over land that has been watered with tears and blood of many generations. There are bones in the earth that cry out for both vengeance and peace. Unsettled spirits still roam. (Campbell 468-69)

Texas is here a metonym for the injustices done to Hosanna’s family, and, by extension, to Blacks by ‘whites’ in general. Poland stands for the injustices done to Gilda’s family by Nazis, and, by extension, done to European Jews in general. The fact that the two places are metonyms for the two traumas clearly emerges from the cited passage: The second sentence alludes to the discourse on the Holocaust which calls for museums, monuments, and educational measures to make sure that the Holocaust is ‘never to be forgotten’ and thus nothing similar will ever happen again. The sentence also picks up another metaphor used to underline especially the horrors of the concentration camps, namely that on the land surrounding the former crematoria no plants will – or rather should – ever grow again. One can also argue that the metaphors used in the first paragraph not only evoke the Nazi death camps but through the explicit reference to Poland point to Auschwitz in particular. It also becomes

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<sup>33</sup> Peters’ source for this spiritual is E.A. McIlhenny’s *Befo’ de War Spirituals: Words and Melodies* published in 1933. The spirituals of this collection had been orally transmitted for generations before that date, however.

clear from this text passage that Texas is a metonym for the violence Blacks had to face under slavery and also after its abolition: The expression “blood and tears” is often associated with the type of hard, physical and unpaid labor slaves were forced to do. It also refers to the arbitrary punishments slaves had to endure and to the many casualties the system of slavery produced – for generations, which is also explicitly addressed in the quotation. The two paragraphs and thus the two places and consequently the two traumas for which they stand are linked in several ways: First, the scenes described both take place in spring (“spring”, “April”). Second, in both places dead bodies are buried in the ground: The first paragraph explicitly mentions graves, in the second, “bones” are a synecdoche for the dead bodies interred. The dead bodies of both paragraphs have in common that they are victims of violent systems of racism as their location implies. Third, the metaphor of the “spirits” shows that the two traumas are still so powerful that they return to haunt later generations. One can thus argue that they have not been worked through and integrated into collective memory adequately. The metaphor of the “spirits” hence establishes a connection between the traumatic histories of the Holocaust and of racism against Blacks by emphasizing that in both places “spirits,” the ghosts of the dead, have not found peace. The refusal of the spirits to dance in Poland can be interpreted as a refusal to move on and leave the traumatic past behind since “disco music” can be read as a metaphor for the ability of the current generation to enjoy life again. This refusal of the ghosts should also be regarded in light of Gilda’s survivor’s guilt and rejection of all positive feelings described above. Concerning the spirits in Texas, the author explicitly states that they are “unsettled” and “still roam” which obviously refers back to the deads’ calls for “vengeance”. One can argue that Hosanna is one of the spirits mentioned in the text passage since she, too, assumes that she can only find peace when Gilda has paid back what she owes her, even if only to Hosanna’s heirs. Moreover, the metaphor of the spirits reconnects the quoted passage to an experience Gilda and Hosanna’s daughters share, namely that of being haunted by dead relatives.

#### **3.5.4. Conceptual Links between Traumas**

In *What You Owe Me*, Campbell makes use of two concepts which explain the emergence and transmission of traumatic memories to indicate similarities between the two traumas of the Holocaust and racism against Blacks.

## Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma and Haunting

How traumatic the loss of the land is for Hosanna's family can be inferred from the fact that the story and the fight for recognition are handed down from generation to generation – sometimes even against the will of the heirs. In trauma and memory discourse, several concepts exist which assume that trauma, individual as well as collective, can be transmitted from one generation to the next if the traumatized did not deal with the experience. Abraham and Torok, for example, suggest that what they call “transgenerational haunting” can prompt the children of traumatized persons to act out what their parents could not do due to their traumatization (Abraham et al.). Marianne Hirsch developed with “postmemory” a similar concept which assumes that children of the first post-trauma generation tend to “defin[e] the present in relation to a troubled past, rather than initiating a new paradigm” (“Generation” 106). In *What You Owe Me*, there are two examples of this phenomenon that are related to racism: Hosanna's father passes the task of making up for the suffered injustice on to Hosanna and Tuney showing them the deed hoping that “[m]aybe one day one of y'all can get the land back” (Campbell 6). This transmitted trauma of the anger about the robbery of their ancestor's land is so powerful that, according to Hosanna, it “keeps his [Tuney's] motor running” (44). Moreover, it is also transmitted to one of Hosanna's daughters, thus inflicting a further generation: Vonette feels obliged to discuss the case with her uncle although she does not understand the legal papers he asks her to read and store (306). The second example of transgenerational transmission of trauma is Hosanna's passing on to her daughters the pain caused by all the discrimination she had to stand, which crystallized in being fooled by Gilda and thus not being able to fulfill her dream of owning a big cosmetics company. She admits: “I passed them on: the debts, the hatred, my rage, and all my fervent desires” (97). Matriece responds to what was transmitted to her by trying to act out what her mother could not achieve. She feels obliged to reclaim what Gilda owes Hosanna by infiltrating her company as her dialogue with Hosanna's ghost illustrates:

*What do you want me to do? . . . She could sense her mother's exasperation, her impatience and brooding. She's fussing at me, just like when I was a kid and I didn't put the lipsticks in the box quickly enough to suit her . . . I can't make it happen any faster. (102; emphasis in original)*

Hosanna's expectations have influenced Matriece's life since childhood and she always failed at satisfying them. This text passage moreover shows that all the emotions passed on to the next generation are embodied by Hosanna's ghost who haunts Matriece and Vonette (e.g. 223).

According to Steve Pile, “the ghost is a social figure that speaks to us of loss, of trauma, of an injustice” (*Real* 131). Hosanna’s ghost is in this sense prototypical. It is the capacity of trauma to haunt that constitutes another link between the Holocaust and the traumas of racism and slavery as depicted in Campbell’s novel since Gilda, too, is haunted by the ghosts of her dead relatives who appear unwantedly and stare at her accusingly:

They stared back at her from the looking glass: her mother, father, brother, boyfriend, grandmothers, grandfathers, one aunt, all the ones who’d perished in the camps. They looked just as they’d appeared before their internment. Through the years since the war, they’d become her companions. (Campbell 157)

They didn’t say or do anything, only stared at her with sad, tear-filled eyes. (305)

The memory of her murdered relatives haunts Gilda in form of ghosts. The force of the traumatic memories becomes also in this case evident through their transmission to the subsequent generation. Gilda’s daughter Rachel admits in the final chapter with Gilda as focalizer that she dreams of her dead relatives (427). Rachel’s admission is surprising since Gilda avoids talking about her past with her children (303). The concept of transgenerational transmission explains her dreams, however, as it also explains Rachel’s incomprehensible anger towards her mother (162) and her preoccupation with the Holocaust. Rachel’s plan to make a documentary on the Holocaust (149), her interest in representations of the Holocaust, as in *The Diary of Anne Frank* (161), and the letter of a Holocaust survivor she gives to her mother as a birthday gift (297) bespeak her attempt to deal with the trauma her mother tries to suppress. The trauma of the Holocaust as well as the trauma of racism are thus handed down from direct victims to their children and haunt their lives.

### **Multidirectional Memory**

To illuminate the intimate connection between Hosanna and Gilda, and hence the traumas they embody, *What You Owe Me* anticipates Rothberg’s theory of multidirectional memory and his argument that one traumatic memory can trigger another one (*Multidirectional*). After Gilda recounted how her boyfriend was murdered by the Nazis and how the Nazis abused her conducting experiments on her body, Hosanna introduces her own account of the rape of her sister and the loss of her family’s land as follows: “Funny how one person’s bad memory can lead you to the one hiding in the back of your mind under the rock you pressed on top of it” (Campbell 39). The account of Gilda’s traumatic experiences thus clearly triggers the release of the traumatic memories Hosanna has suppressed so far. However, Campbell not only presents the traumatic memories of the two women as linked but

goes on to emphasize that this moment of sharing their traumatic experiences has established a deeper relationship between them: In the wake of their conversation, the two women are depicted holding hands (40) and Hosanna, for the first time, calls Gilda her friend (40). One can thus infer that Gilda's traumatic memory not only triggered Hosanna's own traumatic memories but also made the women realize what they have in common and thus offered a basis to build a friendship on. This part of the novel anticipates Rothberg's argument that because memories are multidirectionally linked the memories of one traumatic experience can be evoked by others which seemingly have no bearings on them (*Multidirectional* 17), and his positive assessment of these links as producing mutual understanding. The novel includes nonetheless also approaches which question the productivity of juxtaposing collective traumas as I will show in the next section.

### 3.5.5. Who gets the biggest pork chop? The Contest of Victims in *What You Owe Me*

The link between the traumas of racism and the Holocaust, their common ability to haunt, is symbolically depicted in the novel when Hosanna's ghost, who also haunts Gilda, appears at the same time as the ghosts of Gilda's relatives (Campbell 305). The simultaneous appearance of the ghosts causes a skirmish among them:

She [Gilda] heard noise, the others [ghosts of her relatives] being jostled. She could see the shock in their eyes. It was Hosanna, her face fierce and troubled. The other ghosts began pressing against her, trying to get her to move. . . . But Hosanna stood firm; she pushed back, and they couldn't make her go away. (305)

The skirmish can be read as a comment on the contest of victims looking for public attention in the United States. The ghosts struggle for Gilda's attention but must content with sharing it, arguably, just like the groups of victims who fight for public attention and recognition. This allusion to the contest of victims is emphasized by an intertextual reference: Besides linking the traumas of racism and the Holocaust in *What You Owe Me*, Hosanna's ghost constitutes an intertextual reference to the ghost in Morrison's *Beloved* thus evoking the cruelty of slavery and, arguably, also the above quoted comparison of the numbers of victims of slavery and the Holocaust. In the novel, the conflict is resolved after Gilda finally faced her past by reading the letter from the Holocaust survivor and subsequently promises the ghosts of her relatives to live a better life and apologizes to Hosanna's ghost for not trying to find her and repay her debt (402). Afterwards, the ghosts do not appear again, even when Gilda has a crisis and finally tells

her daughter about her past (425–27). Gilda’s acknowledgment of her traumatic past and the wrong she did to Hosanna is thus presented as a solution to the contest of victims in the novel.

The subtle struggle between the ghosts is not the only instance in which Campbell draws attention to the contest of victimization taking place in US public discourse and in international trauma discourses. These discourses are overtly broached twice in *What You Owe Me*. First, Hosanna describes her co-worker Hattie as follows: “Some of the tales she told, anybody would think that the devil invented white folks just to torment her. There are people in this life who believe that being the biggest victim will get them the best pork chop at the dinner table. That was Hattie” (5). In the introductory quote to this chapter, Hattie is thus depicted as partaking in the contest of victimization since she believes that the person who has suffered the most will be entitled to the biggest compensation. To secure pity and her victim status, Hattie apparently does not refrain from exaggeration and piling on agony. The fact that Hosanna reveals this linguistic strategy can be read as criticism of the discourse that emphasizes victimhood and suffering to gain public attention.<sup>34</sup> Hosanna is obviously critical of Hattie’s competitive world view since her depiction of the co-worker is never affable and she speaks of “Hattie and her mess” (6). It is also obvious that Hosanna does not share Hattie’s attitude since she comforts Gilda whenever she is challenged by Hattie (e.g. 6-7). One can also argue that the author’s critical opinion on the competitive approach to victimhood as embodied by Hattie finds ultimate expression in Hattie’s being fired for attacking Gilda.

Second, Mooney, too, follows the line of thought which compares histories of victimization and deduces claims for compensation from them. He is more pessimistic regarding the rewards than Hattie, however, as becomes clear when he tells Matriece:

I ain’t expecting nothing but hard times. But do we deserve reparations? Hell yeah. Jews got paid with a country for their suffering. Japs got twenty grand and an apology. Indians got reservations and casinos. We got welfare. Now, they done took away welfare. But no, I don’t expect to collect nothing from white folks. (341)

In this text passage, different groups are listed, which re-founded their group identity at least partially on experiences of traumatic victimization and the compensations they received for their suffering. From Mooney’s point of view, the European Jews received Israel as recompense

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<sup>34</sup> This phenomenon has to be seen in the context of the Oprahization of US-public discourses which refers to the multitude of traumatized guests in The Oprah Winfrey Show which suggests that suffering can be used to become famous.

for the Holocaust, Japanese Americans were given money and an apology for discrimination and internment during World War II, and Native Americans received reservations and casinos as compensation for being displaced and discriminated against. All of the groups Mooney mentions have thus been recompensed by the American government, which also means that the government admitted to having caused the suffering at least partially and unrightfully. Blacks, by contrast, did not receive a special compensation for slavery or the discriminatory practices which barred them, for instance, from access to higher education, and economic success. Their only recompense is “welfare,” a questionable form of compensation since it is a support granted in the realm of social programs which, on the one hand, were not exclusively established for Blacks, and, on the other hand, were severely cut back during the 1990s. In this text passage, Mooney thus implies that Blacks are ranked last in the “hierarchy of suffering” because, in terms of a need for recompense for former wrongs, they are considered the least victimized group by the United States’ government – or not even victims at all.

The aforementioned newspaper articles on the law suits for compensation illustrate that the hierarchy Mooney intuitively is reflected in, and probably reinforced by, public discourses on groups of victims. While the compensation for Holocaust survivors is treated in the leading article, Tuney’s class-suit only makes it to “the last page of the national news section” (454). Moreover, the reader learns that “several international organizations had waged a long battle on behalf of the victims” (454) of the Holocaust while the plaintiffs in Tuney’s case can only rely on one lawyer. The way the two law suits, which, as the novel shows, have very similar agendas, are presented in the newspaper and can or cannot benefit from juridical and international support illustrate the significance attached to them and also the willingness to deal with the causes of the law suits. In this hierarchy, the claim of the victims of the Holocaust meets with higher public approval than that of the victims of US-racism.

Campbell not only draws attention to the struggle for recognition and compensation but also questions its validity and the way of thinking on which it is based. The novel presents positive as well as negative outcomes of the juxtaposition of traumas. Hosanna’s and Gilda’s friendship, which only develops after the women have realized that they have a lot in common because of their traumatic experiences, and the benefits accorded to their business partnership, namely that Gilda overcomes her depression and survivor’s guilt and that Hosanna can stop working under discriminatory circumstances at the hotel, suggest that linking the traumatic histories of the two women, and thus of Blacks and Jews, can produce positive

outcomes for both. This notion is challenged when the friendship and the business partnership dissolve because of the racist attitudes of Gilda's uncle. Hosanna muses: "America loved her [Gilda] better. . . . I forgot about her struggles, the pain we had in common. She became as much my enemy as the Hagertys" (97). Hosanna explicitly states that Gilda's disappearance and the theft of their money made her forget what had linked her to Gilda. Moreover, as I have shown above, Gilda admits that she did not try to get back together with Hosanna because she feared being stigmatized like the Black population.

The novel's ending suggests that the author believes in the productive outcome of linking different traumas, or the groups that were victimized by them. The quoted metaphorical juxtaposition of Texas and Poland proposes that coming to terms with traumatic pasts and memories and finding peace can be facilitated by, or might even depend on, a joined effort. The metaphors used in this text passage not only show parallels between the traumas but also indicate hope and the possibility to move on. The depicted scenes take place in spring, the season which metaphorically stands for new beginnings and life, a reading emphasized by the mentioning of disco music, a metaphor for young people's carefree lifestyle, and butterflies, which also suggest effortlessness and liveliness. The two paragraphs also include allusions to future generations. Hosanna wonders if, in Poland, "[perhaps] a daughter wipes a mother's tear" (468). In the paragraph on Texas, Hosanna describes her daughters as follows: "My girls have claims on the land, deeds that must be honored. Their footsteps know no boundaries. . . . They choose who they love and who they will forgive" (469). The daughters are thus a further link between the two paragraphs. They are presented as trying to make up for the suffering of their mothers by consoling them and claiming what rightly belonged to them. In the second paragraph, Hosanna lists some of the possibilities her daughters have, which she probably did not have: Moving freely and being able to choose were rarely options for her generation of Black women. The novel thus ends with the hopeful note that Hosanna's daughters will lead a better life in a juster society. This hope is expressed in a paragraph which links Black American's traumatic past to the Holocaust. The novel hence offers the possibility that focusing on the connections between two historical traumas yields positive outcomes, and especially allows for the overcoming of obstructive distinctions or "boundaries". This notion is reinforced by the novel's critical stance towards contests of victimization.

Finally, Campbell's use of intertextuality as embodied by the references to the spirituals emphasizes that Jews and Blacks are not only linked by the similarity of their traumatic

experiences and their joined fight against discriminatory practices in the USA but also by what one might term their ‘cultural heritage’. Campbell’s reference to spirituals which include stories from the Hebrew Bible points to the processes of borrowing and cross-referencing between collective memories Rothberg traces and which, in this case, date back several centuries. Rothberg states that “the borders of memory and identity are jagged; what looks at first like my own property often turns out to be a borrowing or an adaptation from a history that initially might seem foreign or distant” (*Multidirectional* 5). In Rothberg’s argumentation memory and identity cannot be separated – an argument also supported by Volkan and Aleida and Jürgen Assmann among others. The links between spirituals and the Hebrew Bible Campbell highlights can thus be argued to question the basis of all contests of victimization, namely group identities founded on the uniqueness of traumatic experiences and their recollection.

### 3.6. Interim Conclusions: Common Heritage and Experiences versus the Contest of Victims

*What You Owe Me* differs from the other novels analyzed in this study in its concentration on two traumas – the Holocaust and racism/slavery –, in its explicit comparison of these traumas, and in its extensive discussion of discourses which presuppose a fight for public attention and a hierarchy of suffering. Despite its alleged being tailored for popular consumption and catering to readers’ expectations, the novel picks up several problems, unpopular themes, and unavowed links between the two groups of victims it features. The connection that historically associated US-Blacks and American Jews in their fight against discrimination, their subsequent diverging economic and social advance, and their common cultural heritage, as well as the role of notions of beauty and the denial of beauty play in discriminatory practices are aspects not commonly treated in lowbrow or highbrow literature. Moreover, the novel’s challenges to discourses of the incomparability of traumas, uniqueness, and hierarchies of suffering are more extensive and direct than in any of the other novels of this study. This criticism, the positive connotation of the links established (e.g. friendship, overcoming of boundaries), and the emphasis on the common cultural heritage of American Blacks and Jews suggest that focusing on the connections between two historical traumas can yield positive outcomes.

#### **4. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close***

Reflecting the structure of the first novel analysis, this chapter will start with a brief introduction to the novel's content and structure. In a next step, I will give an overview of the collective historical traumas in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and then, by giving examples of classic representations of trauma in the novel, illustrate what traces of the classic trauma discourse can be found in the novel. Since Foer's novel has been the object of many studies, the subsequent subchapter will present a discussion of the most relevant of these studies that deal with the plurality of traumas depicted in the novel. Building on the insights – and shortcomings – of these previous analyses of traumas in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, I will then deduce, explain, and present examples of how spatial concepts, especially the concept of psychogeography, can make a significant contribution to the study of the juxtaposition of traumas Foer's novel. In the following section, I will then present the findings of my psychogeographical reading of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, showing how it links traumas and positions itself with regard to the Caruthian trauma discourse. Finally, I will sum up the most important insights of this close reading in a short concluding chapter.

##### **4.1. Introduction to the Novel**

Jonathan Safran Foer's 2005 novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* evolves around two main storylines. One is about ten-year-old Oskar, who, as the readers learn gradually, has lost his father in the attacks on September 11, 2001. The second one deals with the Oskar's grandparents who immigrated to the United States after the Second World War, traumatized by the bombing of Dresden, in which they both lost their families. Whereas the reader learns about Oskar from all narrators, the story of his grandparents accrues, with only very few exceptions, in the chapters told by themselves. Oskar's narrative is usually considered the frame narrative since it takes up the biggest part, is the most coherent one and the novel starts and ends with it.

In his account, Oskar tries to find ways to deal with his grief and his feeling of guilt. His guilty conscience derives from the fact that he did not pick up the phone when his father called from the burning World Trade Center on September 11, and probably also from his attempt to conceal this deed by replacing the answering machine, on which his father left several messages, with a new one and hiding the original one to listen to the messages in secret. Oskar is presented as a very clever, or even premature, young man, who has developed several

behavioral tics since his father's death, like playing the tambourine when he is afraid, fear of public transport, writing letters to celebrities, collecting information on 9/11 in a scrapbook and swearing in French. Moreover, the relationship to his mother, whom he suspects of having fallen in love with another man and not loving him anymore, has been deeply damaged since the death of his father. Their communication has almost broken down and Oskar is afraid that she will hospitalize him because he is so sad. Oskar appears to have always enjoyed cognitive challenges. He spent much time with his father playing a game they called Reconnaissance Expedition (Foer 8) in which his father gave him a task or a riddle to solve. Accordingly, Oskar, when happening upon a key in an envelope with the word "Black" written on it, assumes it to be a clue and starts on a secret quest to find the lock to the key. After doing some research on "Black," he decides to see every person called "Black" in New York, even though he is well aware of the vast amount of time this will cost him, especially since he has to rehearse a school theater play of *Hamlet* and give a talk in class, which includes an interview with a survivor of the Hiroshima bombings, at the same time. One of the first Blacks he sees is a very old man who lives in the same building as Oskar and his mother. This A.R. Black joins Oskar and supports him in his quest. When his companion backs out after several months of unsuccessful search, Oskar is devastated. Looking for comfort at his grandmother's, who is out, he meets the man his grandmother refers to as "the renter" and, out of desperation, tells him the whole story. The renter is Oskar's grandfather Thomas Schell<sup>35</sup> whom Oskar had never met before because Oskar's grandmother<sup>36</sup> forbade her husband to get in contact with their grandson. However, when Grandpa sees how devastated Oskar is, he takes pity with the boy and helps him to plan digging up the grave of Oskar's father (who was his own son). The planning would have gone on forever if Oskar had not finally found the lock to the key (302) and realized that there was no hidden message behind it but that his father happened upon the key by accident. Having lost the reason for the quest that made him feel closer to his father, Oskar is ready to dig up the grave to face the truth that his father is dead (321). The storyline about Oskar switches back and forth between Oskar's memories of the time when his father was still alive, the day of the

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<sup>35</sup> Oskar's grandfather appears in the novel under a number of different names, e.g. "Thomas Schell," "grandfather" (Foer 6), "the renter" (69). To avoid confusion and since his family relations to the other characters are important, I will refer to him in the following as "Grandpa" (234).

<sup>36</sup> In contrast to Oskar's grandfather, who goes under several different names, Oskar's grandmother has apparently no name. At least, the reader never finds out. In the following, I will refer to her as "Grandma" (Foer 234), just like Oskar and Foer do.

attacks, the months of his search for the key and the climactic moment when he and Grandpa dig up the grave because Oskar needs to see for himself that the coffin is empty. The storyline ends with Oskar's returning home from the nocturnal trip to the cemetery and his mother waiting for him. For the first time they talk about his father's phone calls on 9/11 and she promises him that she will never hospitalize him. In bed, Oskar goes through his scrapbook and pulls out the pictures of a man falling from one of the windows of the World Trade Center. He rearranges the pictures so the man flies up instead of falling down and imagines all the events that led to his father's death in reverse until the evening of September 10, 2001, when his father tucked him in for the night. The novel concludes with Oskar's statement, "We would have been safe" (Foer 326), and the picture sequence of the man flying up.

The story of Oskar's grandparents is presented in bits and pieces throughout the novel. In the first chapter, told by Oskar, Grandma is introduced as a constant presence in his life, but her husband is not mentioned. From the letters the grandparents write, it becomes clear that although they knew each other in Dresden they met in New York by chance. In Dresden, Grandpa was the boyfriend of Grandma's sister Anna and the father of Anna's unborn child before Anna died in the bombings. The grandparents are marked by grief: Grandpa has lost his language and communicates only in written form, e.g. with the words "yes" and "no" tattooed onto his palms or writing in his "daybooks", or via gestures. Grandma has "crummy eyes" and is eager on assimilating. They got married but, from the beginning, their marriage needed to be organized around rules to make life tolerable. These rules include, for instance, the establishment of Nothing Places in their apartment, where "one can temporarily cease to exist" (110), never seeing each other naked and never speaking of the past (83). When Grandma becomes pregnant and thus willingly breaks the first rule, "No children" (85), Grandpa leaves her and returns to Dresden. From Dresden he writes letters to his son presented to the reader under the heading WHY I'M NOT WHERE YOU ARE. Apparently, he never sends the letters apart from one, which stands out optically for its red correction marks – a sign that Oskar's father, who takes pleasure in correcting articles from the New York Times, read it. Only after his child died in the attacks on the World Trade Center, Grandpa returns to New York City. Since Grandma does not allow him to meet Oskar, he becomes her secret "renter", a person who Oskar believes to be a product of Grandma's imagination. The morning after Grandpa dug up the grave of his son with Oskar and Grandma had dreamt of the Dresden bombings in reverse, he leaves her for the second time because he believes that she was happier without him. But

this time she follows him to the airport and decides to stay there with him because she knows that he can neither stay nor leave. The storyline ends with Grandma's last letter to Oskar written at the airport. She ends her letter telling Oskar that she loves him, hence forging a link to the shared title of her chapters, MY FEELINGS. The most important themes of the storyline about the grandparents are the breakdown of communication, the struggle for living on after traumatic events have shattered the life one knows and the expression or suppression of feelings. It is in the accounts by the grandparents that Foer presents, on the one hand, the bombings of Dresden in gruesome detail and, on the other hand, the events of 9/11 in the, by now well known, form of Grandma watching the video of the towers coming down repeatedly and of Grandpa wondering if what he sees, is a movie.

*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* consists of 16 chapters and more than twenty pictures. Each chapter is narrated by one of three different first-person narrators. It opens with a chapter told by ten-year-old Oskar Schell. The narrator of the second chapter is Grandpa who tells his story in letters to his son (and we might also assume to his grandson), which have been ripped out of the blank books he carries around to communicate with since he has lost the ability to speak. The third chapter is again told by Oskar. The fourth introduces the third narrator, Grandma, who writes a letter to Oskar, which is presented in four parts, or chapters respectively. Until the end of the novel, the "three narratives alternate in an unchanging sequence: Oskar-Grandpa-Oskar-Grandma. The novel goes through this cycle four times and comes full circle with one last chapter by Oskar" (Versluys 80).

The style and language of the chapters differ greatly and thus underline the multivocality of the novel. Oskar's chapters are rendered in a special child-like language and are full of wisecracks, e.g. when Ron, the man whom Oskar believes to be his Mom's new boyfriend, offers to buy Oskar a drum set and Oskar thinks that "Money can't buy me love, obviously" (Foer 3). Despite the child-like language, Oskar appears to be a very precocious ten-year old who intersperses French phrases – for example when he tells the reader about his Mom that "protecting her is one of my most important *raisons d'être*" (68) – and other loan words, like entomology (1) or pacifist (2), into his narrative. Furthermore, Oskar's narrative is marked by scientific findings he learned from *National Geographic* (3) or Stephen Hawking's bestseller *A Brief History of Time* (11) and by his inventions, which often relate to scientific findings and his traumatization, like, for example, the "skyscrapers for dead people that were build down" (3). The letters the grandparents write are "styled as high-art prose poems" (Kirn). Right from the

beginning, Grandpa uses very long sentences. The first sentence, in which he explains how he lost his ability to speak, covers half a page (Foer 16). This characteristic culminates in the only letter he sends to his son (Why I'm not where you are - 4/12/78), which features his memories of the night of the bombing of Dresden, presented in chains of phrases mainly separated by commas (211, 213). Consequently, the very short sentences and abundant use of paragraphing of Grandma's chapters stand in sharp contrast to those by her husband.

All narrators in Foer's novel are unreliable. One example is the contrasting depiction of the grandparents' decision to get married. Whereas Grandpa remembers Grandma proposing to him on the day they met in New York (28-33), Grandma's account suggests that she only asked him after several sculpting sessions (83-85). First-person narrators are, of course, usually unreliable. In trauma narratives, unreliability is often a sign of gaps in and suppressions of traumatic memories. In the quoted example, Grandpa might suppress the memory of the sculpting sessions because they were his painful attempt to let go of his lost love and enter into a relationship with another woman. Even though Grandpa is probably not aware of his intentions, Grandma is: "He was trying to make me so he could fall in love with me" (84). Another example of trauma producing an unreliable narrative can be found in the only letter Grandpa sends to his son ("WHY I'M NOT WHERE YOU ARE, 4/12/78). After leaving the hospital, "I looked for my parents and for Anna and for you" (214), he explains. In "a very subtle confusion of time levels (typical of trauma patients), as well as confusion between the surviving son and the child lost during the moment of crisis" (Codde, "Philomela" 251), Grandpa's "you" refers to his unborn child although the letter is addressed to his son born in New York many years later.

Another recurring characteristic of all three narratives in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is that they do not develop chronologically. In her letter, Grandma switches constantly between memories of events long past, like her childhood in Dresden (e.g. Foer 75-79, 181-84, 225, 308), or meeting her future husband in New York (e.g. 81-85) and their marriage (e.g. 175-81, 184-6, 233), more recent memories, for example of September 11 (224-232) and the funeral of her son (232-33), and depictions of her current stay at the airport with her husband (e.g. 75, 174, 311-2). In Grandpa's letters, the chronology of events is even less easy to reconstruct. This is in part due to the fact that he, in contrast to his wife, wrote the letters on different dates. According to their titles, the first two letters date from "5/21/63" (16, 108), the third from "4/12/78" (208), and the last from "9/11/2003" (262), that is the same day on which

Grandma writes to Oskar from the airport. Moreover, Grandpa gives only scarce accounts of his whereabouts while writing. The first chapter narrated by him, for example, is completely about past events, like his losing his ability to speak (16-18) and meeting his future wife (28, 30-34), and contains no hint at his current life. At the beginning of his second chapter, Grandpa intersperses the information that he is at the airport into his memories of the many rules his marriage consisted of (108). His current stay at the airport fades into the memory of how he met Anna (113) which is in turn replaced by another bit from the airport and more memories of his marriage (119). In the remainder of the chapter, the different time levels interchange several times. By contrast, the third letter by Grandpa mainly abstains from time lapses and gives clear evidence of time and location of the described events: Grandpa is in Dresden – “where your mother’s father’s shed used to stand” – and recalls how, only a couple of weeks before the bombing, he received from Anna the typewriter his wife is writing on in New York (208). This memory is followed by the memory of the day before and the night of the bombing (209-16), which in classic trauma narrative style is not chronological but returns to events right before the bombing after the account of the bombing in a circular narrative, especially the news of Anna’s pregnancy which is mentioned at the beginning (210) and near the end of the account (215). The end of the chapter is marked by leaps from the last time Grandpa met Anna’s father to his meeting his wife in New York to a direct address of the letter’s recipient to his confused present in Dresden and thus reflects the troubled mind of a character who wrote down what he felt unable to tell (216). Grandpa’s last letter, written 25 years later, depicts events less urgently but covers a time span of two years from September 11, 2001 to September 11, 2003, jumping back and forth between memories of how he found out about the attacks on 9/11 and returned to New York where he tried to live with his wife and left again, met Oskar and followed him around. In this last letter, Grandpa locates himself very precisely in a narrated present: “I’m writing as I wait to meet Oskar, in a little less than an hour, I’ll close this book and find him under the streetlight, we’ll be on our way to the cemetery” (267). Oskar is the only narrator who tells his story completely in retrospective; the story never reaches the present. Nonetheless, there are explicit time lapses – “We had been searching together for six and a half months when Mr. Black told me he was finished” (234) – and abrupt time leaps without explanation like Oskar’s account of some other Blacks he visited with Mr. Black apparently during the six months before he quit (239-44). Another example of the time leaps in Oskar’s narrative is the story of the sixth borough which is introduced at the end of the first chapter as

the story his father told him the night before September 11 (13-14) but is only actually told in chapter 12. Surprisingly, the later chapter repeats the introductory dialogue between Oskar and his father before giving the story thus filling a gap in Oskar's narrative which thereby shows typical characteristics of trauma narratives (gaps, circularity).

The distinctiveness of the characters and their respective stories is underlined by the extratextual elements Foer includes. Oskar's chapters, for instance, feature business cards, letters, and cards from Mr. Black's index. The letters the grandparents write also use metatextual elements. While Grandma's letters only stand out for their use of spaces, the pages of Grandpa's letters become ever more packed with ever smaller writing until the words become so superimposed upon each other that they are illegible (281–84). Some pages are completely covered by numbers (270–71) and one chapter bears red correction marks (208–16). Other meta-textual elements applied in the novel include pages with only one short phrase on them, which are taken from Grandpa's blank books and illustrate his communication, like "I'm not sure, but it's late" (25), or even completely blank pages (121–23), which are exemplary of the blank pages Grandma writes in her life story. The most outstanding meta-textual element are the photographs, however. The pictures included in the novel are real photographs of turtles, tennis players, locks, and door knobs, for example. The reader is led to believe that most of these pictures were taken or collected by Oskar. However, they do not necessarily appear when Oskar takes them. Critics have chastised Foer for his apparently unstructured use of meta-textual elements (Codde, "Philomela" 241; Däwes 531). I agree with Däwes, however, who opposes the critical voices she lists by arguing that the meta-textual elements underline the plurality of voices in the novel and states that "Foer's use of visual narratives provides structural complexity and thus a powerful cultural subtext to post-9/11 New York" (532). With regard to the narrative gaps and supposedly messy inclusion of pictures and other meta-textual elements, I follow Atchison's assumption that Foer "disrupts reader expectation by amplifying these sites of transference where the reader must take on the role of co-creator of the text by filling in the absent spaces usually found within the novel's meta-textual representations of absence and presence" (Atchison 360).<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> I find some of Atchison's ideas about scrapbooks valuable for the interpretation of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* but not with regard to the focus of my analysis. For example, he considers the scrapbook an expression of "the need for, and creation of, an artifact for retention in cultural memory" (361). Further intriguing insights about the

The genre of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* has been object of many studies. Most critics agree that Foer “borrows from a number of established narrative forms and genres” (Michael 91), such as the quest narrative of which Oskar’s part shows typical features (Michael), the epistolary novel (Däwes) because of the letter form of the narratives of the grandparents, or even the anti-war novel because of the intertextual references to Kurt Vonnegut’s novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* (Michael). Däwes finds especially Oskar’s narrative to be “a postmodernist pastiche of genres – combining bildungsroman and anti-detective novel, epistolary novel and memoir, as well as documentary and picaresque elements” (529). Besides all these comprehensible analyses of certain aspects of Foer’s novel, its status as trauma or 9/11 novel is beyond dispute. The first three chapters of the novel start, independent of the narrator, with allusions to the narrator’s traumatization: Oskar’s need to invent (Foer 1), Grandpa’s aphasia (16), the bracelet Oskar made of his Dad’s 9/11 messages and his mother wore to the funeral (35). All three chapters also end with allusions to the narrator’s traumatization: Oskar’s not picking up the phone on 9/11 and his Dad’s messages respectively, his Grandpa’s silent call for “Help” (34), and Oskar’s nightmares (74). Hence, not only its themes – bombings, terrorist attacks –, which I will discuss in more detail in the following section, and depiction of characters that show typical trauma symptoms, but also its structure and narrative form – reflecting, for example, unreliable or porous memories – mark the novel as a trauma narrative.

#### **4.2. Collective Historical Traumas in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*: 9/11, the Bombings of Hiroshima and Dresden, and the Holocaust**

Like the other novels discussed in this paper, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* depicts collective historical traumas either directly or refers to them indirectly on different levels. Also similar to the other novels, one can distinguish between major traumas, which play a significant role in the plot, and minor traumas, which are mainly alluded to by use of intertextual references, for example. I will discuss the major traumas in the following sections. Even though it is worth mentioning the “minor” traumas since they position the novel in a literary tradition of trauma representation, I will not discuss them in detail. One such “minor” trauma is in my view the Vietnam War. It is a minor trauma since none of the characters are directly affected

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role of scrapbooking in dealing with individual trauma can be found in Sophie Tamas’ article “Scared Kitless: Scrapbooking Spaces of Trauma”.

by it and it is only once mentioned explicitly when Grandpa in the weeks following 9/11 “read the lists of the dead in the paper” (Foer 272) among which there was a “Vietnam veteran” (272). The Vietnam War gains only more relevance through a double analytical effort: *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* has been widely acknowledged by critics as referencing, or even as a rewrite of, Kurt Vonnegut’s novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* (e.g. (Codde, “Philomela”; Collado-Rodríguez; Hirth; Michael). The novel hence references another novel dealing with the bombing of Dresden. To see a connection to the Vietnam War, the reader then needs to know that Vonnegut used Dresden as surrogate for Vietnam (Hirth 359). This major trauma in recent American history is hence only a minor one in the context of Foer’s novel since it mainly emerges for readers familiar with the intertextual subtext and its own subtext. Other minor collective historical traumas enter the novel as lists of unknown events and dates Oskar learns about when he first visits A.R. Black in his apartment. From Black’s talk the reader learns, for example, about the Spanish Civil War, the Genocide in East Timor, Bay of Pigs, and apartheid (Foer 154). Furthermore, he owns a collection of stones which are souvenirs from “Normandy, 6/19/44”, “Dallas, 11/22/63,” and “Hwach’on Dam, 4/09/51” (156), that is, they refer to the Normandy landings of the allied forces during World War II, the assassination of president John F. Kennedy, and the Korean War. All these traumas are mentioned only in Oskar’s report of his visit to Black’s apartment and are not elaborated upon. War is a recurring topic in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. It seems to be on Oskar’s mind regularly since one of his first inventions would make heartbeats “sound like war” (1), he puts a picture of “a soldier getting his head cut off in Iraq” (42) in his scrapbook and together with his Grandfather he plans to dig up the coffin “like we were planning a war” (321). This preoccupation with war is shared by A.R. Black who characterizes most of the people in his bibliographical index with the word “war” (157-8). Even though they contribute to the novel’s representation of trauma and hint at the kind of trauma discourse Foer tries to establish as I will show in 5.4., they thus remain minor traumas in contrast to those I will discuss in the following section: 9/11, the bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima, and the Holocaust.

### **The Bombing of Hiroshima**

I will start this overview of the major collective historical traumas that play a role in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* with that trauma which seems to stand unhinged from the remainder of the novel: the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima during the Second World War. It appears in the novel as subject of a presentation Oskar gives in class sometime during the two

years after 9/11. Oskar's presentation – and also the chapter "Happiness, Happiness" – starts with an interview between an anonymous interviewer from an organization that recorded testimonies (Foer 189) and a woman called Tomoyasu who survived the bombing but lost her daughter Masako. Tomoyasu tells the interviewer how she and her daughter left home the morning of the bombing, parted ways when a warning was issued, she returned home and her daughter proceeded to work, and how the explosion shattered all the windows in her house and threw her to a different room where she lay unconscious for some time. When she became conscious again, her "only thought was to find her daughter" (187), so she ran towards her daughter's office passing many people who were dead or terribly disfigured by the explosion. Although the interviewer tries to steer Tomoyasu's account towards descriptions of the physical effects of the explosion, like the mushroom cloud or the black rain (188), she continues to talk about her search for her daughter. After being told that she could not cross Tokiwa Bridge, she returned home hoping to find her daughter there. Only on the following morning she receives news of her daughter's whereabouts from the father of one of her daughter's colleagues. On her way to the designated place on the bank of the Ota River, she sees many more dead bodies. She finds her daughter in "horrible condition" with her skin peeling off and maggots in her wounds (188) but is unable to help her. So she resigns to holding her in her arms until she dies nine hours later (189). Tomoyasu ends her story by emphasizing that she felt the need to give testimony and hoped that "if everyone could see what I saw, we would never have war anymore" (189). The traumatic effect of the events on Tomoyasu is illustrated by her mentioning that she still dreams of her daughter in the horrible condition before her death (188). According to Saal, Foer took for his novel a real interview from internet sources verbatim adding only the final lines in which Tomoyasu deplores warfare in general (461). Oskar's classmates, who listened to the recorded interview, are deeply touched; some girls are even crying (189). Oskar, by contrast, "is totally unmoved by the extreme suffering that is described" (Versluys 107) and cannot understand why he is the only one fascinated by the scientific facts about the explosion he subsequently presents (Foer 189-90). These facts, too, underline the human carnage caused by the bombing. To illustrate the "relationship between the degree of burning and color" (189), Oskar gives the example of a game of chess which took place in a park on the morning of the bombing: "the bomb destroyed everything: the spectators in the seats, the people who were filming the match, their black cameras, the timing clocks, even the grand masters. All that was left were white pieces on white square islands" (190). The representation

of the bombing of Hiroshima is thus short (187-190) but very explicit about the impact it had on human lives and consequently has a harsh effect on its audiences, readers and classmates alike. This form of representation also anticipates all possible debates about the traumatic effect the bombing must have had on survivors.

### **The Bombing of Dresden**

Similarly short but striking is the representation of the bombing of Dresden Foer offers in the subsequent chapter (210-15). Presented in the only letter Grandpa actually sent to his son, the three succeeding air raids leave Dresden's inhabitants – human as well as animal –, its buildings and rivers dead or devastated. The depiction of the air raids is chronological as Grandpa experienced them starting with his taking shelter with his family during the first raid (210), followed by his search for Anna interrupted by another air raid (211) and his task to kill the animals freed from the zoo (213), and his break down at the river and subsequent evacuation (214) which is interrupted by another air raid. In contrast to Tomoyasu's account of the bombing of Hiroshima, which gives only few details of the magnitude of the devastation, Grandpa's letter is marked by an overflow of descriptive detail, for example:

I ran through the streets, from cellar to cellar, and saw terrible things: legs and necks, I saw a woman whose blond hair and green dress were on fire, running with a silent baby in her arms, I saw humans melted into thick pools of liquid, three or four deep in places, I saw bodies crackling like embers, laughing, and the remains of masses of people who had tried to escape the firestorm by jumping head first into the lakes and ponds, the parts of their bodies that were submerged in the water were still intact, while the parts that protruded above water were charred beyond recognition, the bombs kept falling, purple, orange and white (211, 213; red correction marks omitted).

As Pederson remarks, "Thomas's traumatic memory is not effaced but instead full to the brim" (348). Again, Foer does not refrain from giving gruesome details of the destruction of human life thus underlining the traumatic impact of the air raids on the inhabitants of Dresden.

In contrast to the bombing of Hiroshima, which is only mentioned at the beginning of the chapter "Happiness, Happiness", the bombing of Dresden reappears in the novel in different forms, either by its explicit mentioning (Foer 17, 183) or by hints in typical trauma narrative style, namely by avoiding direct designation (e.g. "that night", 84, 208, 215). Moreover, it appears in the last part of Grandma's letter to Oskar, in which she relates a dream about the bombings of Dresden in which events go backwards (306): "In my dream, all of the collapsed ceilings re-formed above us. The fire went back into the bombs, which rose up and into the bellies of planes whose propellers turned backward, like the second hands of the clocks across

Dresden, only faster" (306-7). The following dialogue with her husband leads over to Grandma's memories of the last time she saw her father. She had to leave him trapped underneath a collapsed building to save herself (308). In the last reference to the bombing in her dream, her father's tears, whom she had never seen cry before, go back into his eyes (309). How traumatic this experience was for Grandma emerges from her repeated mentioning that she cannot remember the last thing her father said to her (308, 309) and that this memory apparently made her change her ways and follow her husband instead of letting him leave her again (309).

## 9/11

"Nowhere in the novel is there a depiction of 9/11 that is as graphical as that of the Dresden bombing or Hiroshima", finds Mullins (316). This lack of depiction is probably due to the fact that, in contrast to the bombings he mentions, none of the characters are survivors of 9/11 and consequently there is no first-hand witness that could describe what happened inside the towers. The representation of 9/11 that comes closest to a testimonial springs from Oskar's imagination. At the top of the Empire State Building, he imagines a plane crashing into the building below him, "Then there would be an enormous explosion, and the building would sway, almost like it was going to fall over", "It would be getting so hot that my skin would start to get blisters" (Foer 244). This imagined terrorist attack is based on testimonials Oskar found on the Internet, even though he wishes that he had not read them (244). Besides this imagined depiction of 9/11 from inside the towers, the events appear in by now classical 9/11-novel style as mediated by television. Oskar, Grandma (225, 230-32) and Grandpa all watch the attacks on and the falling of the towers on TV. Oskar and his Grandpa both happen upon the images by accident on TV screens in shops. Oskar replaces the phone with the messages from his dad and "It was on a TV there that [he] saw that the first building had fallen" (68). Grandpa sees the images in Dresden's train station and on his way home (272), but what he sees is only hinted at when he, for example, tries to "count the floors above where the planes had hit" (272). Grandma's account of 9/11 is far more detailed. She does not only describe the smoke, the general confusion and her daughter-in-law's attempts to find her husband right after the attacks, but also reflects the repeated screening of the images, which has become an almost indispensable component of representations of 9/11. For instance, after she returned home that night, her narrative consists mainly of a repeated mentioning of "Planes going into buildings" and "Bodies falling" (231-32).

Apart from actual representations of the events of 9/11, imagined or mediated, they appear in recurring allusions. Only in his fourth chapter, Oskar actually says that his father was killed in a terrorist attack (149). Before and after that, he alludes to the events of September 11 mainly as “the worst day” (11, 12, 14, 68, 104, 235, 325). Also, Grandma avoids a direct designation of the events in which her only son was killed. In her letter to Oskar she remembers that she “was in the guest room when it happened” (224).

### **The Holocaust**

Foer’s representation of the Holocaust seems to resist the distinction between major and minor traumas. Some critics consider the Holocaust a “key traumatic reference, haunting and complicating Foer’s text” (Saal 455; see also Hornung 177). One major argument for this is its telling absence from the novel:

As such, the Holocaust and particularly the fate of the Jews, which at first sight seem quite surprisingly absent from this novel (which instead focuses on German civilians suffering at the hands of the allied forces), reenters the novel with a vengeance as an absent but very disturbing, haunting presence that immediately contextualizes the bombing of Dresden in all its historical specificity. (Codde, “Keeping” 683)

The representation of the Holocaust in Foer’s novel differs significantly from that of 9/11, and the bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima since it works solely via intertextual references, allusions and names of places and people. The hints at the Holocaust become more and more explicit in the course of the novel, however. First, among A.R. Black’s bibliographical cards is one of a prominent Holocaust survivor: “Elie Wiesel” (Foer 157). Here, the absence of a direct reference to the Holocaust is especially obvious since Wiesel’s one-word biography says “war” (157). Next, Grandpa reports how he was introduced to Simon Goldberg by Anna’s father. In this passage, Goldberg is presented as a broken and disheveled intellectual looking for a place to stay (126). Together with his Jewish name and Grandpa’s repeated mentioning of war and trains departing from Dresden the impression is evoked that Goldberg might be a Jew fleeing from the Nazis (127). The information on Goldberg is interspersed and almost hidden in Grandpa’s memory of him and Anna making love for the first time. It is hence only because of Goldberg’s reappearance in later parts of the novel that this character gains significance. The offer of Anna’s and Grandma’s father that Goldberg can stay as long as necessary (127) is challenged by Grandma’s statement about him, which constitutes the next reference to the persecution of the Jews by the Nazis: “He [her father] wanted to save the world. He must have weighed my life against a life he might have been able to save. Or ten. Or one hundred. He

must have decided that my life weighed more than one hundred lives” (183). This quote suggests that the father of the two girls decided to keep his head down to protect his family instead of trying to save others. Nonetheless, Grandpa recalls that on the day of the bombing, he heard a sound from the shed and expected it to be Goldberg since he “knew that Anna’s father had been hiding him” (209). In the shed there is only the desperate looking father, however. In the following, Grandpa jumps back and forth in his memory of the day and night of the bombing. Consequently, the news of Anna’s pregnancy and his last conversation with her become intermingled with the depiction of the bombing and the letter from Goldberg her father gave him before he left: “The letter had been posted from Westerbork transit camp in Holland, that’s where the Jews from our region were sent, from there they went either to work or to their deaths” (215). While the other three traumas are represented, even if only briefly and/or mediated by TV, the atrocities of the Holocaust remain undepicted with this one exception which refers to the death camps. Grandma’s assumption about her father and the fact that her father killed himself after surviving the bombing (215) suggest that he felt guilty for Goldberg’s deportation which probably led to his death. In the novel’s last reference to the Holocaust, Goldberg has turned into a ghostlike character who appears, hugs Grandpa in a book store in post-9/11 New York and disappears without speaking a word: “the more I looked at him, the more unsure I was, the more I wanted it to be him, had he gone to work instead of to his death?” (279). The last reference to the Holocaust is thus, on the one hand, explicit about the genocide of the Jews, and, on the other hand, questions the death of this particular Jewish character.

#### 4.3. Classic Representations of Trauma in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*

In the following, I will exemplify how Foer indicates that his main characters suffer from traumatization by attributing classic trauma symptoms to them.<sup>38</sup>

##### Depression

A whole cluster of trauma symptoms evolving around depression can be discerned in Oskar. From the way he depicts himself, one can deduce that Oskar suffers from the classic

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<sup>38</sup> For a detailed analysis of PTSD symptoms which especially Oskar (e.g. sadness, hypervigilance, nightmares, panic) and his grandmother (e.g. survivor guilt, nightmares) see Uytterschout and Versluys.

posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptom depression. The reader learns that on more than one occasion Oskar is too sad to go to school (Foer 42, 142) and he also describes himself as depressed in his feelings book (171). The most obvious indication of Oskar's depression is the repeated description of him wearing "heavy boots": "My boots were so heavy that I was glad there was a column underneath us" (163). Foer apparently made this expression up in order to make clear that Oskar is pulled down by the weight of his traumatic experience and memory. So whenever Oskar learns about other people's suffering or suffers himself from the loss of his father or the many things he cannot talk about, his boots become heavier (142, 159, 242, 251, 302).<sup>39</sup> To explain his sadness, Oskar uses an image of a black hole from the classic psychological discourse on trauma. He admits that "[t]hat secret [of the missed calls from his father on the answering machine] was a hole in the middle of me that every happy thing fell into" (71). Oskar's grandmother, too, feels that she has a hole inside herself which makes her unhappy. Despite all their problems, she clings to her husband because "[h]is attention filled the hole in the middle of [her]" (83).

Oskar's depressive state finds also expression in his many fears and phobias, most of which are obviously linked to 9/11:

Even after a year, I still had an extremely difficult time doing certain things, like taking showers, for some reason, and getting into elevators obviously. There was a lot of stuff that made me panicky, like suspension bridges, germs, airplanes, fireworks, Arab people on the subway . . . , Arab people in restaurants and coffee shops and other public places, scaffolding, sewers and subway grates, bags without owners, shoes, people with mustaches, smoke, knots, tall buildings, turbans. (36)

The list of Oskar's fears can be extended by adding the fear of "a dirty bomb" (87), public transport (87, 194), skyscrapers (90), and roller coasters (147). However, his most urgent fear is of death itself (154).

To cope with his depressive state, Oskar applies three very different strategies. Firstly, whenever he is really sad or desperate because of his father's death, Oskar bruises himself (37, 41, 69, 90, 207, 243). For example, when he finds out that the key has nothing to do with his father he thinks: "If I'd been alone, I would have given myself the biggest bruise of my life. I would have turned myself into one big bruise" (295). Oskar thus displays a self-harming behavior typical of people who suffer from depression. In view of Uytterschout and Versluys,

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<sup>39</sup> Oskar's "heavy boots" are also analyzed by Uytterschout and Versluys (228).

“The physical pain of the bruises echoes Oskar’s inner pain of missing his father” (231), but it becomes also obvious that the bruises are meant to attract his mom’s attention even though Oskar denies this:

WHEN I WOKE UP, MOM WAS PULLING MY SHIRT OFF TO HELP ME GET INTO MY PJS, WHICH MEANS THAT SHE MUST HAVE SEEN ALL OF MY BRUISES. I COUNTED THEM LAST NIGHT IN THE MIRROR AND THERE WERE FORTY-ONE. SOME OF THEM HAVE GOTTEN BIG, BUT MOST OF THEM ARE SMALL. I DON’T PUT THEM THERE FOR HER, BUT STILL I WANT HER TO ASK ME HOW I GOT THEM (EVEN THOUGH SHE PROBABLY KNOWS), AND TO FEEL SORRY FOR ME (BECAUSE SHE SHOULD REALIZE HOW HARD THINGS ARE FOR ME); AND TO FEEL TERRIBLE (BECAUSE AT LEAST SOME OF IT IS HER FAULT), AND TO PROMISE ME THAT SHE WON’T DIE AND LEAVE ME ALONE. BUT SHE DIDN’T SAY ANYTHING. (Foer 172f)

This quotation is telling in different ways: it names Oskar’s fear of death, especially that his mother will die, too, and will leave him all by himself. Moreover, it shows that Oskar suffers from his impression that, after the death of his father, his mom is incapable of giving him the attention and sympathy he is desperately in need of. Secondly, Oskar has developed a strategy, which appears in many readings of the novel as a major intertextual reference to Günther Grass’ *Die Blechtrommel (The Tin Drum)*, he plays the tambourine: “I desperately wish I had my tambourine with me now, because even after everything I’m still wearing heavy boots, and sometimes it helps to play a good beat” (Foer 2). Playing the tambourine does not only lighten Oskar’s spirits when he is depressed, it also helps to restore his sense of identity that was put into question by his father’s death. During his search for the lock, he explains: “I shook my tambourine the whole time, because it helped me to remember that . . . I was still me” (88, also 90). Thirdly, also his inventions are an attempt at dealing with the causes of his traumatization. According to Foer, “Every invention of his is an act of trying to fill in a hole” (Birnbaum), but Michael’s interpretation that Oskar “spends a good deal of time imagining inventions that could save people’s lives as way of counteracting dwelling in the horrors of the 9/11 bombings” (Michael 106) is also to the point.

### **Speechlessness**

The incapacity to speak of the traumatic experience is a symptom Grandma shares with her husband: First of all, Oskar’s grandfather does not speak anymore. He lost the first word shortly after his arrival in New York, and then “the silence overtook [him] like a cancer” (Foer 16). The fact that the first word he lost was “Anna”, the name of his lost love, suggests that his traumatization lies at the core of his speechlessness. Uytterschout and Versluys suggest that Grandpa “unconsciously inflicted this condition on himself” (222). They consider this self-

crippling, on the one hand, proof of his “unwillingness to cope with his traumatic past” (222) and, on the other hand, evidence of his feeling that “[speech] ... is an inadequate means of expression” (224), thus drawing on classic trauma discourse’s argument of the inexpressibility of traumatic experience. The inability to speak about their past characterizes the relationship of Oskar’s grandparents right from the beginning. About their very first meeting in New York, Grandma writes to Oskar that they “had everything to say to each other, but no ways to say it” (Foer 81). Instead, they talked for hours always repeating the same things, namely that her eyes were crummy and that some mornings he felt grateful (81). Moreover, they stopped speaking their mother tongue German when they decided to get married. This decision can be regarded as their way to free themselves from the language that would always be linked in their minds to the people and things they lost during the war. Despite their inability to speak about their traumatic experiences, there are different hints at the fact that both feel the urge to share their experience but the feeling that it is impossible to do so. Instead they choose to bury everything inside them while being aware of the harm this may cause, as Grandma admits: “[t]here were things I wanted to tell him. But I knew they would hurt him. So I buried them, and let them hurt me” (181).

Likewise, Oskar’s grandfather confesses that  
 [w]hen your mother found me in the bakery on Broadway, I wanted to tell her everything, maybe if I’d been able to, we could have lived differently . . . Maybe, but I couldn’t do it, I had buried too much too deeply inside me. (216)

Versluys argues that Foer’s novel illustrates the importance of language typical of 9/11 novels by showing that “saying nothing and saying everything are virtually synonymous” (14), that is both approaches fail to share the traumatic experience and consequently overcome it. Examples of this paradox are Grandpa’s phone call to Grandma after his return to New York in which he tries to tell her “everything” (Foer 269) by pressing the telephone buttons but all she hears are beeps and all the reader sees are numbers (269-71), and his letter about the Dresden bombing which, although it motivates his son to look for him, does not trigger communication between them, they talked “about nothing” on their only meeting (277).

Oskar, too, cannot speak of his trauma for two main reasons: On the one hand, Oskar has piled up so many secrets, like his father’s telephone messages, that it is impossible to speak of his feelings without giving them away. As a consequence, he cannot tell his mother how much he misses his father: “I couldn’t explain to her that I missed him more, more than she or anyone else missed him, because I couldn’t tell her about what happened with the phone” (71). On the

other hand, Oskar cannot speak of his experiences and feelings because there is no one he can talk to. When Mr. Black backs out of the search, Oskar realizes that he cannot speak to his mom nor to his friends, that he cannot talk to animals like his grandfather and that he does not trust his psychiatrist enough to confide in him (234). The only acceptable interlocutor is his grandmother, but she is not at home. In these accounts of Oskar's behavior, it becomes evident that he feels the lack of an empathic listener who would allow for his formulating the traumatic experience as Laub argues (e.g. "Truth").

Incapable of confiding in his mother who offers to talk when she tucks him in at night (Foer 168, 315), Oskar develops the strategy to retreat into "the sleeping bag of himself" which he zips up to take an emotional distance whenever his feelings are hurt and he feels the need to interrupt all communication with the people around him. This is the case, for instance, when Oskar gets the impression that his mom does not love him, like on the way to the funeral: "She could tell that I was zipping up the sleeping bag of myself, and I could tell that she didn't really love me" (6). Oskar also feels the need to retreat to his "sleeping bag" when he has the impression that his mom does not grieve enough for his father: "I zipped myself all the way into the sleeping bag of myself, not because I was hurt, and because I had broken something, but because they were cracking up" (37). For ten-year-old the symbolic sleeping bag thus takes on the function of a cozy retreat from a painful world and a shelter against uncomfortable questions.

Oskar compensates for his incapability to talk to the people close to him about his traumatization by adopting another strategy, namely that of externalization: he talks to strangers. He tells his grandfather, when he is still unaware that they are relatives, the story of his search for the lock (238). He also tells William Black, the ex-husband of the second Black, about his father's voice messages on 9/11 of which he has never spoken to anybody before (300-2). One can deduce from Oskar's behavior that he is convinced to find empathic listeners only in strangers. This might be due to the fact that he does not have to be afraid that they will stop loving him when he confesses all lies – a fear that seems to haunt ten-year-old Oskar in the confrontations with his mother (170).

### **Writing to Express the Unspeakable**

As I have shown, Oskar's grandparents know that their tendency to bury their emotional problems instead of speaking about them harms them even further. Since they feel unable to talk about their experiences, the two turn to writing them down as a way of externalizing them.

In the chapters entitled “Why I’m not where you are” (Foer 16, 108, 208, 262) Oskar’s grandfather writes letters to his child in which he describes, for example, the night of the air raid on Dresden in which his family and Anna were killed (209-15). In addition, he must write down everything he wants to communicate in his daybooks (e.g. 19-26). Like her husband, Grandma turns to writing letters, too. In the chapters entitled “My feelings” (75, 174, 224, 306) she explains in letters to Oskar everything that she was never able to tell him in person, like the description of the second traumatic event in her life, namely the death of her son on 9/11 (224-32), or her wish to have a child and the feelings when her husband left her (175-86). It is actually Oskar’s grandfather – who evidently believed in the curative function of writing – who recommends to his wife to write down her life story (119) because at least at the time when he makes this suggestion, he believed that it would do her good. Unfortunately, the memoirs only become yet another symbol of the lack of communication and understanding between the grandparents. When Oskar’s grandmother shows to her husband what she has written, he finds only blank pages but does not have the courage to tell her (120). Since Grandma feels that her life consists of spaces (176), i.e. is shaped by emptiness, the writing of the life story does not have the healing effect anticipated by her husband. Nevertheless, writing, especially letters, remains for the grandparents the only way out of their speechlessness. It seems easier to write a painful experience down than to talk about, perhaps because it grants more control about the time and the content than when facing an interlocutor and his reactions.

Oskar resembles his grandparents in some of the survival strategies he takes on to cope with his traumatic grief: Firstly, he, too, writes letters:

A few weeks after the worst day, I started writing lots of letters. I don’t know why, but it was one of the only things that made my boots lighter. One weird thing is that instead of using normal stamps, I used stamps from my collection, including valuable ones, which sometimes made me wonder if what I was really doing was trying to get rid of things. (11)

Although Oskar states that he does not know why he writes these letters, the reader learns that he does indeed reflect on the function of his writing: it makes him feel less sad and frees him of things that weigh him down because it permits him to express some of the feelings he cannot put into spoken words.

Secondly, recalling Grandpa’s try “to compensate for his aphasia” by “writing daybooks”, Oskar puts his feelings down in his “feelings book” (170-3) and owns a scrapbook entitled “Stuff That Happened to Me,” in which he collects the pictures and the information from his Internet researches (42, 240, 325). Why the scrapbook is a way of dealing with traumatic loss is

explained by Miller: “the scrap, by definition, is a part of something larger, a fragment, an excerpt. The scrap calls up what’s missing. . . . To own the part feels like a way of remaining attached to the vanished whole” (Miller 44–45). One can thus argue that Oskar collects articles, statistics and pictures of 9/11 – such as photos of “someone walking on a tightrope between the Twin Towers” (Foer 42) – because they help him to appropriate parts of the ungraspably large, and therefore traumatic, catastrophe of the destruction of the World Trade Center in which he lost his father.

### **Accumulation of Information to Explain the Unknowable and Inventions**

The scrapbook also functions as an archive for another survival strategy of Oskar’s which is to accumulate as much knowledge as possible about the events of September 11.<sup>40</sup> Oskar’s research about what it was like in the World Trade Center on 9/11 (Foer 244), or about the windows in the Twin Towers (250) can be interpreted as “the psychological need to do detective work, to grasp at anything that could help explain how this completely inexplicable thing had happened” (Kacandes 176).<sup>41</sup> Oskar’s desperate need to find out how his father exactly died is a driving force in his searches.

His longing to find out more about the exact course of events is explained by Oskar when he speaks to his grandfather for the first time:

“I need to know how he died.”  
 He flipped back and pointed at, “Why?”  
 “So I can stop inventing how he died. I’m always inventing.” (Foer 256)

Finding out about his father’s death is in Oskar’s eyes the only way to make him stop inventing things which is yet another survival strategy of Oskar’s: whenever he needs to keep his mind off scary thoughts, like in bed when he cannot go to sleep (1-3, 36, 38, 69, 74, 258f, 315), or when he is especially sad (163), he invents ‘useful’ devices. Oskar’s inventions are for the most part directly linked to 9/11, such as “a skyscraper that moved up and down while its elevator stayed in place” (3) or “air bags for skyscrapers” (160), and thus reflect Oskar’s fears. For Oskar, inventing has become an obsession:

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<sup>40</sup> This aspect, too, references DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, in which the main character Lianne thinks that she can better deal with her traumatization when she reads everything about 9/11.

<sup>41</sup> See also Uytterschout who argues that detective work is a typical drive of trauma victims (“Visualised” 69).

I started inventing things, and then I couldn't stop, like beavers, which I know about. People think they cut down trees so they can build dams, but in reality it's because their teeth never stop growing. And if they didn't constantly file them down by cutting through all those trees, their teeth would start to grow into their own faces, which would kill them. That's how my brain was. (36)

The reader learns, however, that Oskar did not need to invent things to occupy his brain and calm him down before 9/11 because his father's presence gave him the needed comfort and security: "Dad always used to tuck me in, and he'd tell the greatest stories . . . Being with him made my brain quiet. I didn't have to invent a thing" (12). After his loss, Oskar hopes to restore the lost calmness by finding out about how his father exactly died.

Oskar has to realize, however, that the accumulation of knowledge does not necessarily bring him closer to his aim of pin pointing the circumstances of his father's death. The information he has gathered has even done him a lot of harm since he learned many things that he would rather not have known about:

I did a few other searches, even though I knew they would only hurt me, because I couldn't help it. (42)

Then there would be an enormous explosion, and the building would sway, almost like it was going to fall over, which I know is what it felt like from descriptions I've read on the Internet, although I wish I hadn't read them. (244)

The search for details thus hurts Oskar. The double feeling of wanting to find out as much as possible while at the same time being afraid of what one might learn is typical of trauma. The following quotation by Dori Laub, contributor to the Caruthian trauma discourse, shows that many Americans shared this feeling with Oskar after 9/11:

We are still involved with the ongoing struggle between an imperative need to know what it is that has happened to us all – not only to those who were in the buildings into which the planes crashed and to their families and friends but to all of us in America, no matter how distant from the scene of the attacks – and an equally powerful urge not to know, a defensive wish to deny the nature of the tear in the fabric of our shared lives. (Laub, "September" 204)

Many of the things Oskar comes across during his search do not only worsen his emotional state but also do not help him to reach his goal of understanding how his father died. He has to realize that "the closer you looked, the less you could see" (Foer 293) which fits his earlier cognition caused by the search of the Central Park: "The more I found, the less I understood" (10). Conclusively, Oskar experiences that – as it is the case with other collective historical traumas – the catastrophe of 9/11 becomes even more rather than less unfathomable, the more one learns about the gruesome details.

## References to Classic Trauma Discourse

*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is probably one of the most studied 9/11 novels. Most critics who analyzed the novel applied Caruth's concepts and can thus be seen as part of the classic trauma discourse. To name just a few, in his article "Philomela Revisited: Traumatic Iconicity in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*," Philippe Codde counters the approach that the novel's "form is completely inappropriate for representing 9/11" ("Philomela" 241) by highlighting the capacity of non-verbal representation to overcome the inexpressibility of trauma:

Precisely because words fail to capture the past in the wake of trauma, Foer . . . seeks other forms of representation, and the formal experiments that so many critics have objected to are perhaps as close as the author can come to rendering the condition of the traumatized mind" ("Philomela" 248).

The same Caruthian argument that the inexpressibility of trauma calls for special forms of representation is used to explain the narrative structure of the novel: Since "words simply fail to capture these shattering experiences," "verbal testimonies . . . tend to be extremely circuitous and oblique" (Codde, "Philomela" 242). Uytterschout's analysis entertains a similar (Caruthian) idea about the novel's form:

The storylines of Oskar Schell and his paternal grandparents reflect trauma on the level of content. When language falls short, several visual interludes (such as the inclusion of pictures and changes in typography) represent the nature of trauma on the metatextual level. Those visual interruptions illustrate two specific characteristics of trauma, namely incomprehensibility and the question of legitimacy and adequacy" ("Visualised" 73).

Brittany Hirth refers to Caruth's concept of latency, which claims that trauma can only be understood and represented after a certain period of time has elapsed, to explain why the bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima are included in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. In her view, a representation of 9/11 was not yet possible when Foer wrote the novel (339), so he chose to represent it indirectly via the two historic events (357).

In summary, a classic trauma studies approach unearths diverse explanations for the way trauma, and especially the traumatization of the individual characters, is represented in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. In contrast to the other novels that are object of this study, also the juxtaposition of collective historical traumas in the novel has been discussed by some scholars who even in part found new names for this phenomenon. I will give an overview of these approaches in the following section.

#### 4.4. Previous Analyses of the Juxtaposition of Traumas in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*: Trauma Transfer, Traumatic Solidarity, Transnational-, Post-, and Multidirectional Memory

In contrast to the novel which I will discuss in the following chapter (*Let the Great World Spin* by Colum McCann), Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* has always easily been classified as "9/11 novel". With its publication in 2005, it led the first wave of fictional representations of the attacks of September 11, 2001, which ran from 2005 to 2007 and included, for example, Lynne Sharon Schwartz's *The Writing on the Wall* (2005), Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* (2006), Jess Walter's *The Zero* (2006), John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006), and DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007). Consequently, the first full-fledged studies of 9/11 fiction, like Keniston and Quinn's *Literature after 9/11* (2008) or Versluys' *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* (2009), appeared only several years after the novel's publication and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* became only hindsight a "typical 9/11 novel". By now, manifold analyses of 9/11 fiction exist. And even though the applied terminology varies, from "Ground Zero Literature" (Däwes) to 9/11 novel (Versluys), almost all of them state similar characteristics of the subgenre they deal with. These include notably avoidance of direct representation of the events or a problematization of techniques of representation (Michael 19; Michael 3; Däwes 522; Gray 14), multiple narrative voices (Michael 10; Keniston and Quinn; Gray 19), characters suffering from PTSD (Gibbs 33), inclusion of typical tropes and images (e.g. the Falling Man (Bardizbanian 308; Däwes 536–37)), intertextuality (Däwes 522), and a critique of public and political discourses on the attacks through inclusion of counter-narratives (Däwes 522; Michael 2).<sup>42</sup> As I have shown, Foer's novel fulfills all of these criteria. From my own previous analyses (Koschorreck, unpublished manuscript), I would add that also the traumatization of children is a recurring topic in 9/11 novels. It is not only significant in Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* but also DeLillo and McInerney include this aspect in their novels.

Despite its relative early publication and its position as forerunner of novels dealing with 9/11, the special form and representational choices of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* have caused much debate, with many critics chastising Foer for his approach. In my view, however, Foer's novel is the most important point of reference, if not a kind of measuring rod, for all

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<sup>42</sup> These characteristics show many overlaps with the features deemed typical of trauma narratives in general as analyzed by Vickroy and Whitehead, for example.

following fictional accounts of 9/11. This becomes apparent in interviews with other authors but most significantly in many intertextual references to *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* – a point I will elaborate on in the next chapter since also *Let the Great World Spin* positions itself in the field of 9/11 fiction by, among other things, referring to Foer's novel.

In contrast to the other novels discussed here, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* has also been studied with regard to the juxtaposed representation of several collective historical traumas. In this section I will summarize and discuss five existing analytical approaches to the plurality of traumas and their relationships in Foer's novel and the concepts they refer to for analysis. In the next chapter, I will then complement these approaches by presenting a sixth analytic perspective which takes the concept of psychogeography into specific focus.

### Trauma Transfer

Departing from Judith Butler's theory of narrative framing and her hope that the events of September 11, 2001, could be framed in a way that preclude an egocentric view and revanchist feelings in the US, Ilka Saal analyzes Foer's novel as one example of the, according to her, quite common post-9/11 approach to deal with 9/11 through the lens of other historical traumata (454). In her view, "bringing the trauma of 9/11 into conversation with other, older collective traumata suggests an attempt to engage the pain of others and to consider the myriad ways in which global power structures implicate one's own vulnerability in that of others" (455) and is thus an attempt to achieve the kind of framing Butler was hoping for. Saal calls this conversation between several collective traumas "trauma transfer" and analyzes how trauma transfer works in Foer's novel on the level of composition, narrative structure, and tropology (nondiegetic) and on the level of character perception and plot development (diegetic). According to Saal, the two levels come to different conclusions in their assessment of the capacity of trauma transfer for transgenerational and transnational communication (457). Whereas on the nondiegetic level the bombing of Dresden "might serve to fulfill the role of a 'successful' trauma transfer – that is, of establishing an analogical reference that brings the events of New York into dialogic exchange with a previous trauma so that the global links between various vulnerabilities become apparent" (464-65), on the diegetic level, Oskar and the other characters in the novel fail to achieve an empathetic secondary witnessing of the suffering of others and to establish transnational/transgenerational communication (459-64): "despite the characters' great urgency to communicate, the various letters and memoirs they compose merely convey the impossibility of communicating their traumatic past" (458). As an

example of this failure, Saal gives Grandpa's only sent letter which, instead of achieving the transgenerational sharing of his trauma with his son, only receives attention for his spelling mistakes (465). Saal's approach helps to elucidate some of the seeming inconsistency in Foer's novel, like the breakdown of communication between the characters versus the apparent commonalities between the traumas. It does not consider Hiroshima, however, at least not as trauma in its own right but only as part of the "larger semantic field of World War II atrocities" (455).<sup>43</sup> This might be due to her, in my view, exaggerated insistence on the Holocaust as key trauma in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (455). Also, she does not analyze the different ways in which Foer actually establishes "analogies" (455) between these collective historical traumas but rather simply presupposes that these analogies exist.

### Traumatic Solidarity

In his article "Boroughs and Neighbors: Traumatic Solidarity in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*," Matthew Mullins proposes with "traumatic solidarity" an approach which resembles Saal's trauma transfer in its emphasis on transnationality. Mullins claims that

*Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* suggests that all individuals are members of numerous collective groups, such as class, gender, occupation, and religion, but goes one step further and posits an alternative identity that connects individuals in these various, and sometimes opposing, groups. What I propose is that traumatic solidarity is an additional collective that works across these group identities (300).

According to Mullins, this new identity emerges because the inclusion of Hiroshima and Dresden "destabilizes a sense of entitlement and victimization for any single group based on trauma" (304). He gives three main examples which contribute to the creation of traumatic solidarity in Foer's novel: First, for Mullins, the Story of the Sixth Borough is the "most coherent narrative moment" in which traumatic solidarity manifests itself (302) since it depicts "a lost unity that was never truly lost at all" (318). The second example of the phenomenon is the assemblage of people with the last name Black during Oskar's Hamlet performance. They have been brought together by Oskar's traumatic loss of his father but do not lose their individual

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<sup>43</sup> In her article on *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, which states an interlacing of traumatic events, Audrey Bardizbanian also chooses this simplified approach which ignores the representation of the bombing of Hiroshima ((300)). The reasons for this approach remain unclear, however, since arguments such as "[by] interweaving the bombings of the World Trade Center with those of Dresden, Foer highlights that vulnerability and suffering are not unique to New York" (304), would have gained more force through the inclusion of Hiroshima.

identities because of this commonality (308). Third, Oskar's interest in the interview with the Hiroshima survivor bespeaks, in Mullins' view, a "complex cross-cultural identification between victims of trauma in very different contexts" (312). Mullins' concept seems applicable to *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* even though his analyses and examples often remain superficial. Like Saal's analysis, Mullins' study lacks an examination of how the traumas are linked. He states their existence and deduces an effect of it which is oftentimes too unidimensional and optimistic, as in his concluding sentence: "Foer blurs the lines between 'us' and 'them' and offers difference as an opportunity for community instead of confrontation because when we do violence to the 'other,' we truly do violence to 'ourselves'" (323).

### Transnational Memory

Birgit Däwes considers the parallel representation of 9/11 and the bombings of Hiroshima and Dresden in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* a successful approach to promote transnationalism. Based on Russel Duncan and Clara Juncker's definition of transnationalism as "a loosening of boundaries, a deterritorialization of the nation-state, a higher degree of interconnectedness among cultures and peoples across the globe" (Däwes 523), she analyzes how Foer's novel uses a plurality of voices and media to "[replace] the individual concern with a communal one, emphasizing the need for several voices and dialogue" (540) and thus "subscribes, ethically and structurally, to what Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider define as transnational or cosmopolitan memory" (540). However, she discusses only two aspects which illustrate parallels between 9/11 and Hiroshima: the similar impressions of disaster, like shattered glass or the smell of grilled squid, and, secondly, Tomoyasu's final statement on the impact of warfare on civilian victims (531). All other connections and other collective traumas are not discussed.

Alfred Hornung, too, interprets the juxtaposition of collective historical traumas in Foer's novel as a form of transnational memory. The transnational memory of the bombings of Hiroshima and Dresden is, in his view, used to explain "the national trauma [of 9/11] for which no solution seems to be available within the national frame" (174). Hornung contrasts his approach, which situates transnational memory on the level of author and reader, with that of Däwes, who situates it "on the level of the three narrators, Grandpa, Grandma and Oskar" (176), and argues that the transnational memory is triggered by the intertextual references to Günther Grass' *Die Blechtrommel* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (177). While Hornung is certainly right that "[b]y analogy to the transnational memories of Dresden and

Hiroshima, Oskar and his grandfather, as well as the readers can fathom the immensity of the effects of international terrorism” (177), especially with regard to “the destruction of human lives” (176), this argument also indicates his unidirectional slant: Hiroshima and Dresden are included to represent the most recent trauma of 9/11. An analysis of the ways the traumas are juxtaposed is not his aim and remains superficial with the aforementioned assumption of an analogy or unexplained as in his statement that “the experiences of the grandfather figure Mr. Black as a war correspondent . . . form the bridge to Oskar’s real grandfather and his experiences of the bombing of Dresden in World War II” (174) (Hornung®).

### **Postmemory, Pre- and Re-traumatization**

Several other scholars have dealt in their analyses of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* with the fact that traumatization runs in the family of the Schells. Consequently, the analytic approaches include postmemory, or pre- and re-traumatization. For Uytterschout and Versluys, for instance, “the grandparents’ experiences might be seen as an instance of pre-traumatisation (by the Dresden bombings) and re-traumatisation by the events on 11 September” (220). According to Hirth, the “father and grandfather characters exemplify how trauma is generationally transmitted to their (grand)son through ‘postmemory’” (339). She argues that Oskar and his grandfather connect via their traumatic experiences, “[recognizing] traumatic experience in each other across the span of World War II to 9/11”, for example in the act of burying the letters the grandfather wrote to his son, Oskar’s father (348). Both arguments are obviously valuable but nonetheless cannot explain the representation of the bombing of Hiroshima in the novel. Moreover, they are both not interested in the way these traumas are represented and juxtaposed on the textual level.

### **Multidirectional Memory**

Of interest for this study is also Hirth’s attempt to include Rothberg’s concept of multidirectional memory in her analysis of Foer’s novel. She finds that in the novel, “[just] as Rothberg advocates, 9/11 analysis and representation is informed by the way past World War II traumas were previously represented” (339). In what way *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* makes use of *multidirectional* memory remains unclear, however, since Hirth’s argument is that the novel “[reproduces] other historical ‘traumas’ to represent this contemporary incident [of 9/11]” and “reflects how a return to history, and the familiarity with it, can serve as exploration of a contemporary tragedy” (357–358). Apart from the fact that it is questionable in how far

the American public is familiar with the events of Dresden and Hiroshima, her argument lacks an explanation for the other direction, that is, for how 9/11 influences the memory of the two World War II events.

All aforementioned studies deal with the fact that Foer includes not only 9/11 but also other collective historical traumas in his novel. Most find a name (trauma transfer, traumatic solidarity, transnational memory) for the juxtaposition of traumas, or rather for its alleged effects, without discussing in detail how Foer represents the traumas and establishes relationships between them. When taking a closer analytical look at these relationships, however, they appear more complex than initially suggested in the literature. In fact, although *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is the most analyzed and discussed among the novels of my study, it turned out to also be the most difficult to analyze in terms of the connections between traumas. In the next section, I will show that space and sensory experiences play a so far underestimated role in the analyses of the representation of traumas in Foer's novel and thus propose to add this perspective to the analytical tool kit when studying the complexity of trauma relationships.

#### **4.5. Trauma, Space and Sensual Experiences in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close***

You can see the most beautiful things from the observation deck of the Empire State Building. . . . It's like New York is a miniature replica of New York, which is nice, because you can see what it's really like, instead of how it feels when you're in the middle of it. It's extremely lonely up there, and you feel far away from everything. Also it's scary, because there are so many ways to die. But it feels safe, too, because you're surrounded by so many people. (Foer 245)

##### **4.5.1. Space and Sensual Experiences in the Novel: Nothing Places and Blank Spaces**

Looking at the novel in detail, I realized that space and movement through space, immobility and nothing places, drawing maps and connecting places as well as getting to know something by means of reconnaissance are recurring themes. These themes often go hand in hand with the depiction of sensual experiences. Already the novel's titles imply that distance ("close") and places ("the sixth borough," "where you are") as well as hearing ("loud") play a significant role. Oskar lists streets and boroughs through which he passes on his quest for the lock and takes pictures of the things he sees. Also, trauma is often related to space, i.e. the traumatization of the characters often finds expression in special perceptions or constructions of space. The title of Grandpa's letters, for example, implies the significance of being at a certain

place and his inability to be where he should be, namely with his son. His whereabouts are obviously trauma-related since he changes the location after every traumatic event: from bombed Dresden to New York, after the news that his wife is pregnant back to Dresden, after 9/11 back to New York. His restless relocating is related to his inability to let go of the past at the beginning of his first letter when he complains that “it’s so painful to think, . . . what did thinking ever do for me, to what great place did thinking ever bring me?” (Foer 17). Just as he is not able to stop thinking, Grandpa is not able to stay in New York or Dresden, so his traumatization forces him to stay at globalization’s in-between place par excellence, the airport. In this “geographical space of liminality” (Hornung and Kunow 197), he is joined by his similarly traumatized wife.

Two major recurring examples of how trauma and space are interlaced and complemented by sensual experiences are the Nothing Places the Grandparents create and the spaces in Grandma’s writing. The marriage of Oskar’s grandparents is organized around rules. Some months into their lives as a married couple they start marking off “Nothing Places” in their apartment “in which one could be assured of complete privacy, we agreed that we never would look at the marked-off zones, that they would be non-existent territories in the apartment in which one could temporarily cease to exist” (Foer 110). Uytterschout and Versluys read the creation of Nothing Places as symptom of the grandparents’ traumatization since they illustrate their “inability to live in the present” (221). This explanation seems valid but is hard to proof since the reader is never told what exactly the grandparents do when they are in one of the Nothing Places. One quote from the novel even suggests that the Nothing Places are created to make the past disappear, as it is embodied by pictures, for example, that is by things that the grandparents cannot or do not want to see. Grandpa states that “even pictures need to disappear, especially pictures” (Foer 110). The Nothing Places are in any event related to trauma since they are one of the many rules the grandparents establish. With this behavior, the grandparents fall into line with the characters of many other trauma novels, like *Falling Man* by Don DeLillo, for instance, in which traumatized characters try to live on by setting up rules. Grandpa notes regarding the Nothing Places that “we were trying to make our lives easier, trying, with all of our rules, to make life effortless” (110). The creation of Nothing Places is an act of virtual and real mapping triggered by the wish to organize a live that has become unhinged by the trauma of the Dresden bombing. At first, the grandparents only “drew maps in [their] heads” but later they have to resort to a real map to keep up with the spreading of

the Nothing Places: “We took the blueprint of our apartment from the hallway closed and taped it to the inside of the front door, with an orange and green marker we separated Something from Nothing” (11). The definition of special places in the apartment is thus directly linked to trauma, as becomes also clear from Grandma’s remark that they “made *safe* places in the apartment where you could go and not exist” (176; my emphasis). The Nothing Places thus respond to a need for safety typically attributed to trauma victims. Grandpa’s hope that since “[everything] was forever fixed, there would be only peace and happiness” (111) remains unfulfilled, however. The novel offers at least two possible reasons for the failure of the Nothing Places which are both related to trauma and underline the role of sensual experiences. Deciding not to see someone or something is a form of suppression which, especially if it is related to trauma, usually works only for so long. The fact that the Nothing Places are mainly about suppression of memories emerges in the following passage taken from one of Grandpa’s letters: “But a friction began to arise between Nothing and Something, in the morning the Nothing vase cast a Something shadow, like the memory of someone you’ve lost, what can you say about that” (110). Also, from Grandma’s letter the impression arises that the Nothing Places are another maneuver invented by her husband to make her disappear, so she will not disturb his grief for Anna – or at least is perceived by her as such. Grandma tells the reader of her letter “that she would have done anything for him” (177), even “make love in nothing places” with the lights turned off, although “It felt like crying” (177) and although she realizes that he thinks of someone else. But Grandma rebels against her annihilation, first by using tricks like telling him that her eyes are “crummy” – thus referring to her inability to see – to make him pay attention to her (176), then by following his advice to write her life story and discuss the empty pages with him repeatedly (130), and finally by breaking the first rule and having a baby (177).

The second recurring example of how trauma and space are interwoven with seeing, in particular, in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, are the blank spaces in Grandma’s writing. They are linked to the Nothing Places because Grandma is set up by Grandpa to write in the guest room, which is a Nothing Place and makes her disappear from his view (119), even though she does not like it (“But it’s a Nothing Place” 119). He thus realizes only too late that there is no ribbon in the typewriter (124) and that she has been typing thousands of blank pages. In Grandpa’s view, writing the story of your life is a way of mapping, he expects his wife to feel the “exhilaration of building the world anew” (119). The story of Grandma’s life is also another

example of the thwarted communication between the grandparents. While Grandpa thinks the pages are blank because there was no ribbon in the typewriter and because of Grandma's poor vision, she wrote them on purpose: "I went to the guest room and pretended to write. I hit the space bar again and again and again. My life story was spaces" (176). From this quote becomes clear that 'space' stands for 'void' in this context, that Grandma perceives her post-World-War-II life as empty, thus taking up one of the major symbols of trauma literature. This reading is supported by Grandma's solution to this feeling of emptiness, that is having a child. She describes the moment of revelation in the following words: "One morning I awoke and understood the *hole* in the middle of me" (177; my emphasis). The term 'space' is thus clearly linked to trauma, also because the spaces return in Grandma's letters to Oskar, even if only in reduced form. Many critics have elaborated on them as signs of her traumatization. Versluys sums up quite well that the

conspicuous spaces between the sentences stand for the hiatuses in her [Grandma's] life, the voids everything is centered around and the silence out of which she speaks. . . . The very layout of the page is testimony to the slow, painstaking genesis of the word (98–99).<sup>44</sup>

Versluys thus brings together the symbolism of the hole, often used in the representation of trauma, with the common symptom of speechlessness and the perception of trauma as inexpressible.

Moreover, also Oskar's perception of distance has been altered by the traumatic loss of his father. Oskar feels "far away from everything" (Foer 36, 245) because of his traumatization. He admits: "A lot of the time I'd get that feeling like I was in the middle of a huge black ocean, or in deep space, but not in the fascinating way. It was just that everything was incredibly far away from me" (36). To express his feelings, even one year after his father's death, Oskar uses the opposite of the novel's title and the word 'space', referring to the vast extension of the universe. In contrast to Grandma's use of the term, Oskar's space is not a void but an expression of distance. He feels so distanced, so "incredibly far away" from everything, especially at night, that he must invent things to distract himself (36). Feeling detached from the people around you is an often-quoted symptom of trauma. Consistent with the symbolism of the rest of the novel, Foer uses spatial imagery to illustrate Oskar's traumatization. The novel links this feeling of detachment to the need to touch and smell: one night, "after what felt like a googolplex

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<sup>44</sup> Davo makes a similar point (106-7).

inventions” (36), Oskar goes to his father’s closet in which finds the key. His feeling of distance that Oskar described in the previous paragraph is here contrasted with the smell of his father and Oskar’s touching his clothes. The fact that his need to feel and smell his father’s things is a reaction to his traumatic loss emerges from Oskar’s statement that “it made [his] boots lighter to be around his [father’s] things, and to touch stuff that he had touched” (36).

Given the plurality of examples in which space and trauma influence each other in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and sensual experiences complement these two concepts, I decided to elucidate the juxtaposition of traumas in the novel by applying a spatial approach which can also account for the role of sensual experiences. In the next chapter, I will briefly introduce the concept of space applied in this study, discuss concepts proposed by cultural theorists which lend themselves to analyze trauma and space in conjunction, give an overview of previous spatial analyses of Foer’s novel and finally suggest the approach which is most fruitful for the aim of this study because it brings together a spatial approach and sensual experiences, namely psychogeography.

#### 4.5.2. Space Concepts in Cultural and Literary Studies

##### Defining Space

Space is a fluid concept applied in different disciplines, such as geography, physics, sociology, or cultural studies. This diversity is also reflected in the many existing diverging definitions. Until the spatial turn, which, according to Catharina Löffler, took place at the end of 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s (23),<sup>45</sup> space was usually considered “a mere backdrop” to or a stable “container” of historical events (23). In *La production de l’espace* (1974), Henri Lefebvre introduces his groundbreaking concept of social space, which until today forms the basis of most definitions of space. Lefebvre argues that “(Social) space is a (social) product” (26), that is that space is constructed by society and that nature or physical space is merely decor or the basis from which social space is developed (30–31). Consequently, each society produces its own space by appropriating the physical space (31). Moreover, the production of space and its product cannot be separated, that is all analyses of the production

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<sup>45</sup> Frank states that the spatial turn in cultural studies in Germany took place as late as around the year 2008. In his view, this spatial turn crystallizes around two strands of analysis: one draws attention to the spatial aspects of history, the other focuses on the social constructedness of space (60).

of space form part of the production (36–37). Lefebvre’s approach to space is marked by Marxist notions. It states that space is not only a means of production but also of power and control and aims at elucidating the role of space in capitalism and neo-capitalism (32). This Marxist approach finds also expression in Lefebvre’s argument that social space contains the social relations of biological reproduction, as the organization of the family, and the social relations of production, like the organization of work, which are connected and influence each other (32). One reason why Lefebvre’s concept has been accessible and fruitful for cultural studies is that it considers the role of representation in the production of space. It introduces the triad of spatial practice, representational spaces, and representations of spaces. In neo-capitalism, spatial practice “embodies a close association, within perceived space, between daily reality (daily routine) and urban reality (the routes and networks which link up the places set aside for work, ,private’ life and leisure)” (38). Representations of space are the dominant form of space. Scientists, planners, and artists, for example, create this conceptualized space (38). Representational space designates “space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’”, it is “the dominated – and hence passively experienced – space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate” (39). Since space has been commonly considered constructed and relational since the spatial turn (e.g. Certeau; Harvey; Löw et al.), and since I necessarily focus on *representations* of space, Lefebvre’s concept is also the basis of my analysis.

As Löffler notes, the understanding of space as constructed not only gives “literary representations of space a crucial position within the overall study of space” but also “[stresses] the importance of the individual” (24). The role of the individual emerges, for example, in the concept of space Löw et al. propose: for them, two mutually dependent processes form the basis of spaces (Räume), namely spacing and an effort at synthesis (*Syntheseleistung*) (64). By synthesis the authors mean that spaces form when people link elements; social goods, people and other creatures are merged to spaces due to processes of perception, imagination and memory (64). Building, constructing, and positioning constitute acts of spacing (64) but spacing is only possible when simultaneously acts of synthesis concatenate social goods and people to spaces (64). Löw et al.’s definition of the process of synthesis hence highlights the importance of human mental processes which play a major role in representations of trauma and thus offers a first point of entry for considerations of space and trauma.

## Space Concepts in Cultural Studies

A literature review of space concepts applied in cultural and especially literary studies has brought to the fore that many concepts exist which focus on the aspects I highlighted in Löw et al.'s argument. Two relevant strands can be discerned: First, especially the interplay of space and memory has been object of many studies. Two concepts that deal not explicitly with representations of space and memory in literature but form the basis of most cultural studies' approaches are Pierre Nora's *Lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) (1984-1992), which highlights the role of real and symbolic places for the crystallization of collective memory and identity, and Aleida Assmann's *Erinnerungsräume* (memory spaces<sup>46</sup>) (1999), which differentiates between memory (*Erinnerung*) and recall (*Gedächtnis*) and emphasizes that the relationship between memory, recall, and space is dynamic. The role of narratives in the construction of sites of memory quickly emerged as an important object of study. Edward Said, for example, directed attention to the fact that sites of memory are always ideally constructed and that consequently, memory and place usually occur in a triad with invention.

The second strand of analysis links space with individual or collective emotions and perceptions. Affective space is one such concept which developed in the recent heyday of affect as analytic category. Woodward tries to define the concept of affective space as follows:

affect expresses not only relations between formal or typological bodies, but also . . . the forceful proximities and involvements of environments. The materialities attached to such situations, it seems, are something much more than simple spaces of affect (as though they were affect's mere production). Rather, they are affective spaces – or “sites” . . . – participating fully in immediate, forceful engagements. (332)

Based on the assumption that environment and affect influence each other mutually, Frederik Tygstrup has offered a “cultural analysis of affect” using Don DeLillo's novel *Falling Man* as example. Tygstrup gives a rather vague explanation for the role of affect and the need to analyze it. He wants to “acknowledge . . . that the real relational spaces in which we live, and in the formation of which we take part as agents and participants in social and material situations, have an affective dimension” and states that affects are hard to grasp “because they are spatial, virtually present in the blueprint of relational structures in which we express and unfold

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<sup>46</sup> The official translation of lieux de mémoire is sites of memory; Assmann's term has apparently not been officially translated. Since her concept in contrast to Nora's deals more with virtual places in which memory is stored, I would translate it by “memory spaces” and use this term in the following.

ourselves as spatial beings” (205). In his analysis of the DeLillo’s novel, however, Tygstrup shows persuasively how DeLillo depicts “the collective state of being affected, of losing balance, of being unable all of a sudden to read and understand what is around” (206) after 9/11 as ingrained “in the very fabric of the urban space” (207). Even though Tygstrup analyzes a 9/11-novel and the affects he carves out are trauma-related (fear, sense of danger, the feeling of your life-form being contested (206)), this approach is not applicable to analyze connections between traumas in detail since the only link it would bring to the fore is that for all traumas the affective space is marked by affects typical of trauma.

### **Approaches Drawing on Space and Trauma Concepts**

In 2010, Janet Walker “[called] for a ‘spatial turn’ in trauma studies” (47). In 2016, Gail Adams-Hutcheson repeated this call (1) thus supporting my assessment that hardly any concepts exist that consider space and trauma together. Among the very few studies I found the following to be the most relevant: Already in 2004, Anne Whitehead included a chapter on “trauma and landscape” in her widely-cited study of trauma fiction. The analysis of the role of landscape in trauma fiction uses as example Anne Michaels’ novel *Fugitive Pieces*, which deals with the traumatic aftermath of the Holocaust for survivors of the first and the second generation. Whitehead argues that “landscape provides for Michaels an important and potentially redemptive counterforce to the catastrophe of the Holocaust” (10). As theoretical basis and proof that “‘place’ occupies a rich and interesting position in contemporary trauma theory” (48), Whitehead quotes Nora’s *lieux de mémoire* and “Geoffrey Hartman’s writing on landscape and place” (48). However, already Hartman’s approach questions the transferability of the Wordsworthian “memory place” onto representations of the Holocaust (49) and, although Whitehead gives a minute analysis of the memorial role of wood, water, and stone in *Fugitive Pieces* (61–62), a general and transferable approach to the role of space or landscape in representations of trauma does not emerge.

In her analysis of filmed situated testimonies after the hurricane Katrina, Walker “extrapolates from Cathy Caruth’s insights about psychoanalytic ‘belatedness’ and critical human geography’s anti-essentializing conceptions of place to expose the concomitant materiality and unassimilability of traumatic space” (47). According to Walker, space and trauma are significant aspects for the analysis of these testimonies since they were filmed on the “spot where catastrophic past events occurred” (49). Walker’s harking back to Caruth’s theory of belatedness, which has been widely put into question, is of course problematic – a

fact she admits herself (52). Moreover, her approach is marked by the virginity of the territory she tries to map, that is, it contains inconsistencies and is marked by a high number of claims and aims which need elaboration to develop into a full-fledged methodology.<sup>47</sup> She settles for calling for an approach based on Lefebvre's understanding of space as constructed which integrates "the enormously promising insights from critical human geography" (52). Such an approach "would seem extremely useful for understanding trauma as the experiential displacement of place, protagonist, and . . . of spectator" (53).<sup>48</sup>

In her 2016 article "Spatialising Skin: Pushing the Boundaries of Trauma Geographies," Adams-Hutcheson supports Walker's call for a spatial turn in trauma studies. Analyzing interviews with people who relocated after the earthquakes in Christchurch New Zealand in 2010, Adams-Hutcheson brings together several approaches:

Linking conceptualisations of trauma to theories of subjectivity developed through critical human geographies, in particular feminist and emotional geographies, the emphasis on emotion and affect draws a line to the role of embodiment in the transmission of trauma. In short, understanding trauma as occupying psychological and corporeal spaces is significant to reimagining trauma as a geographic phenomenon. (1)

Probably due to the plurality of concepts – ranging from Freudian and Caruthian theories of trauma (2) to embodiment and emotional geographies – Adams-Hutcheson's arguments and theoretical framework remain sometimes unclear.<sup>49</sup> Her argument that "skin does more than contain and internalize, it is more than the surface entity of the body (the epidermis), it is considered to be where the social, the psychological and the bodily become inseparable" (3) is irrefutable, however. Moreover, the approach works for her objects of study, since the rupture of the earth's layers and skin, which caused the traumatization (6), and the bodily reactions – "[trauma] plays across the skin, a rash of goose-bumps perhaps, arising in ordinary spaces" (3) – show obvious similarities and emerged as tropes in the analyzed interviews. Adams-Hutcheson's approach is hence very specifically tailored to the analysis of the interviews of people in a special situation and therefore hard to apply to explain the juxtaposition of traumas

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<sup>47</sup> In the course of the article, Walker claims, for example, that social suffering is a more useful concept than trauma (52) but keeps using the term and concept "trauma".

<sup>48</sup> Another main aim seems to be to show the "generative possibilities of place" (Walker 52).

<sup>49</sup> For example, her main argument to use skin as analytic tool to uncover the connections between embodiment and trauma seems to be the current popularity of the concepts (Adams-Hutcheson 3).

in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. It includes one point, however, that turned out to be of relevance for my analysis: the interplay of space, bodily senses and trauma.

This short literature review on studies and concepts dealing with space and trauma illustrates the need for an approach which combines the two concepts. Moreover, the manifold references to human geography which suggested that this discipline offers concepts fruitful for the analysis of the interplay between trauma, space, and sensual experiences in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, led to the selection of literary psychogeography as main analytical approach for my analysis.

### **Spatial Analyses of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close***

In addition to the general attempts at developing a theory which applies spatial concepts to the analysis of trauma representations, some critics consider space expressly in their analyses of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Francisco Collado-Rodríguez, for example, draws on the aforementioned chapter on landscape and trauma by Whitehead transferring it to the role of the cityscape (57) in Foer's novel. Since the focus of his article is on the significance of modernist and magic-realist elements for the ethical implication of the reader, Collado-Rodríguez devotes not much attention to the spatial aspect which he mentions as merely one of the characteristics of trauma novels carved out by Whitehead (56-7). He states that the novel presents two main sites of memory, New York (57) and Dresden (58), and touches upon the significance of moving from one place to another and the creation of "Nothing Places" in the depiction of Grandpa as traumatized (59). His analysis thus barely exceeds the assertion that trauma and space are linked in the novel and does not deal with the plurality of traumas included in the novel.

Brittany Hirth starts her article with the claim that "Jonathan Safran Foer's novel . . . illustrates how quickly trauma is transmitted and shared in an urban space" (338). She further underlines the significance of the site of New York for the representation of traumas when she detects that "the city is also the site where Oskar meets his long-lost grandfather who brings with him traumatic stories of having survived World War II. Across generations and through the very city's five boroughs, Foer brings together past and present historical traumas." (338) This promising overture is, however, followed by the outline of the concepts Hirth applies in her analysis: Marianne Hirsch's "postmemory" and Michael Rothberg's "multidirectional memory" shall "elucidate how the city provides a space to think about the recent trauma of 9/11" (338). Apart from the fact that Hirth's repeated notion that the city of New York – and also the two

other collective traumas she mentions, namely Dresden and Hiroshima (344) – provide the opportunity to represent 9/11 and learn more about it (339–340) is in my view reductive, she proposes two concepts which include only slight if any spatial aspects. Consequently, her following analysis of space and its relation to trauma remains superficial. In her view, the “city and its sites provide Oskar the space to contemplate and connect the past historical events to his current trauma surrounding 9/11” (343), and the fact that a plane crashed into the Empire State Building allows for the building to become the “[space] for mimetic trauma” (342). Interesting points, such as the search for a loved one which the three character’s Grandpa, Oskar, and Tomoyasu undertake (347) thus journeying through a city marked by traumatic events, are not elaborated upon. The second half of the article even gives up this line of examination all together and is instead devoted to the analysis of the photographs in Foer’s novel by applying the Caruthian concept of latency.

The title of Bardizbanian’s article “Writing Post-Traumatic Memories, Writing the City: Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*” explicitly brings together the representation of trauma and of place. Like Hirth’s and Collado-Rodríguez’, Bardizbanian’s study *de facto* also deals with several other aspects, like the photographs included in the novel and the grandparents’ inability to communicate, and devotes only little attention to her proclaimed aim to “explore how . . . urban landscapes are portrayed as powerful sites of memory” (301). She follows Collado-Rodríguez’s approach by referring to the cited chapter by Whitehead, adopting his vague concept of cityscape (301) and analyzing the mythical elements in the novel (304–305). The main insight of Bardizbanian’s article regarding traumatic cityscapes is that there are two “different cityscapes” in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* which are depicted as “devastated and wounded sites of memory” (311): New York and Dresden (303). This insight does not emerge from her analysis, however. Moreover, it illustrates Bardizbanian’s unexplained decision to exclude Hiroshima completely from her analysis. An interesting aspect which Bardizbanian brings up but fails to link concretely to trauma and space emerges from the following statement: “The novel follows Oskar’s urban adventures through New York City, a literal and psychological journey that he undertakes to cope with the traumatic loss of his father” (301). Bardizbanian considers Oskar’s travels across New York City as one of the magic realist elements in the novel (304) and neglects the aspect of coping with trauma by wandering around the place in which the traumatic event took place.

All of these concepts introduce possible ways of analyzing how space and trauma interrelate. Some remain superficial, deal with aspects not transferable to Foer's novel, fail to explain how connections between traumas are established, or are only applicable to two of the collective historical traumas represented in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Nonetheless, they offer potential points of entry into an analysis of trauma and space and the connections produced by these two aspects. Especially the fact that three of the four main trauma characters search for loved ones in the city marked by trauma suggests a connection between the traumas of 9/11, Dresden and Hiroshima. Consequently, I looked for an approach which could help to analyze this aspect and came across the concept of literary psychogeography, which furthermore incorporates an analysis of the role of sensual experiences.

### **Literary Psychogeography: A Concept for Analyzing Space and Sensual Experiences**

The basis of my analysis of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* forms the concept of literary psychogeography. Following Catharina Löffler, I use the term "literary psychogeography" to designate a methodological approach which analyzes manifestations of psychogeography in literature.<sup>50</sup> Usually considered as originating from the Situationist International of the 1950s, psychogeography has become a more widely known and applied concept since the 1990s (Löffler 6–7).<sup>51</sup> As its name suggests, psychogeography is an interdisciplinary approach. It

describes spatial experiences in relation to social, physical, historical, psychological and geographical dimensions of everyday life. With its roots in theories of new urbanism, psychogeography indicates the impact of urban space on and its significance for individuals who set out to experience the city (6).

The main geographical aspect of this approach is the perception and analysis of urban experiences. In its original form, psychogeographers achieve insights through the activity of walking (Löffler 47), which is considered an act of subversion since it resists the modern call for effective and quick transportation (12). There are different answers to the question what constitutes the psychological aspect of psychogeography. For Löffler it suffices to consider "the emotional and psychological dimension of urban experiences" (Löffler 6). In *The Body and the City*, Steven Pile argues that geography has at least since the 1960s been interested in

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<sup>50</sup> For an overview of the development of literary geography and recent strands see Brosseau.

<sup>51</sup> For the genesis of psychogeography see Löffler 43ff or Pile (*Body* 6–15).

psychoanalytic findings, e.g. in the form of behavioral geography (*Body* 23–44), and gives an overview of other approaches which link the two disciplines, for example by applying Julia Kristeva’s concept of abjection (*Body* 82–95). He gives a detailed argument advocating a fusion of geography and psychology, which is based on the theories by Freud, Lacan, and Lefebvre (*Body* 147ff),<sup>52</sup> and is critical of the fact that the unconscious has been neglected in psychogeographical approaches so far (*Body* 18). Psychogeography gains even more relevance with regard to trauma studies when one considers that contemporary psychogeography presupposes that “the external physical world does not exist without influence by the mind, by memories, or by sensory perception” (Löffler 42). Moreover, Pile suggests in a later study that it is necessary to “[disclose] the significance of dreams, magic, vampires, and ghosts for the emotional work of city life” (*Real* 3) to understand what constitutes the distinct character of a city. Consequently, borrowing from Freud’s psychoanalysis and Walter Benjamin’s concept of phantasmagoria, he proposes an approach which considers the city as phantasmagoric, “a spectacle, where the surfaces of the city did not betray the means through which they were produced,” and as “full of movement, of criss-crossing times and spaces, a serial procession of dreams and ghosts” (*Real* 15). With its interest in memories, emotions, the unconscious, and phenomena often linked to trauma, like dreams and ghosts, contemporary psychogeography is hence already a combination of space- and trauma-related approaches.

Furthermore, the formal and thematic elements which mark a text as literary psychogeography underline its affinity to trauma studies. To define literary psychogeography, Löffler quotes van Tijen, who coined the term in 1991: literary psychogeography is “any writing that manages to capture the influence of a particular part of a city or landscape on the human mind, or a person’s projection of inner feeling or moods onto the outer environment” (Löffler 51). With its emphasis on subjectivity (5–6), Löffler’s interpretation of literary psychogeography stands in the, according to Sheila Hones, newly emerging strand of literary geography which “increasingly [focuses] on narrative not as representation but as a spatial practice” (73) and thus applies an understanding of space as constructed.<sup>53</sup> Consequently, mere topographical

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<sup>52</sup> Pile states that “[there] is . . . a productive gap between Freud’s, Lacan’s and Lefebvre’s understandings of space in which it is possible to site an argument which stresses the difficulties of subjectivity, spatiality and power” (*Body* 147).

<sup>53</sup> Hones discusses the problematic notion of “space as container or setting” (71–72) which prevailed in literary geography until very recently. Her own argument is based on Massey’s definition of space as product of interrelation and always in the state of becoming (Hones 80). Consequently, she argues for the inclusion of “themes

references do not suffice to define a text as literary psychogeography (51). According to Merlin Coverley, who was the first scholar to link psychogeography and literary studies (Löffler 8), common features of psychogeography are “an antiquarianism which views the present through the prism of the past” (Coverley 14), a “perception of the city as a site of mystery” (13), and the drive “to reveal the true nature that lies beneath the flux of the everyday” (13). Especially the first feature brings to mind the intrusion of the past into the present and the victim’s incapability to live in the present often associated with trauma. Besides definitions of the concepts of psychogeography and literary psychogeography, Löffler gives as a clear categorization of themes and formal elements typical of literary psychogeography. Even though Löffler’s study does not deal with trauma or its representations and her objects of study are accounts of eighteenth-century London, her analyses treat a variety of aspects which can also be found in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. In the following, I will show what insights emerge from an application of Löffler’s analytical categories to Foer’s novel and complement it by other theories which can help to grasp the connections between collective historical traumas marked by or produced by a certain understanding of space combined with the depiction of sensual experiences.

#### 4.5.3. A Psychogeographical Reading of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*

Löffler carves out four characteristic themes and three characteristic formal elements of eighteenth-century literary geography. The characteristic themes are a blending of fact and fiction (97), dark visions of the city (101), a sense of place (99), and the rendition of multi-sensory experiences (111). As main formal elements she presents focalization (114), multimodality, and rhetorics of walking (119).<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, according to Löffler, a prerequisite of literary psychogeography is “a walking entity exploring the (urban) environment” (57). These characteristic elements can also be traced in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* in which they are not only linked to trauma but also link traumas.

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of narrative space, literary space, and textual space” as well as “the spatialities of literary creation, production, promotion, and reception” (72) in literary geographical analyses. Whereas this is a just argument, I do not agree with her assessment that narratology still assumes that space is a stable category (73) (see my overview of spatial concepts in cultural and literary studies).

<sup>54</sup> Löffler borrows some of these formal and thematic elements, like the sense of place, for example, from Coverley (16), although she criticizes his study for its lack of definitions and the brevity of literary interpretations (8), among other things.

### Traumatized Walking Entities, Restricted Narration, and the Rhetoric of Walking: “how it feels when you’re in the middle of it”

In Foer’s novel, there are at least three “walking entities” who explore a city: Oskar, his grandfather, and Tomoyasu. For all three characters, the act of walking is directly linked to their traumatization since they all look for loved ones they lost due to the traumatic event. In the case of Grandpa and Tomoyasu, the search on foot even forms part of the traumatic event since it takes place in its direct aftermath or even while the bombing continues. As a result, the city they walk through and the inhabitants they encounter are marked by the devastation.

As a consequence of the focus on the walker, a formal characteristic of literary psychogeography is the use of restricted narration, events are represented from the point of view of a focal character (Löffler 114–15). This is obviously also the case regarding the three walkers in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. First-person narrative, and hence a common feature of trauma fiction, thus merges with the typical psychogeographical narrative mode. Another formal element, which Löffler includes and which in Foer’s novel brings together first-person trauma narrative and the aspect of walking, is the rhetoric of walking. Oskar, Tomoyasu and Grandpa all highlight their movement on foot by repeatedly mentioning their way of walking: Tomoyasu runs (mentioned three times on page 188); Oskar emphasizes his walking activity (for instance: three times on page 196, walking down the steps of the Empire State Building on page 254, names of the parts of New York through which he walks on page 88); Grandpa walks over victims of the bombing (211) but runs during his search for Anna (twice on page 211 and also on the following pages). In Grandpa’s chapter, the rhetoric of walking takes also a different form: The act of walking – or rather running – is “echoed in the narrative structure of the text” (Löffler 120) as he produces longer and longer chains of sentences linked by commas thus reflecting his breathless running:

On my way to Anna’s house, the second raid began, I threw myself into the nearest cellar, it was hit, it filled with pink smoke and gold flames, so I fled into the next cellar, it caught fire, I ran from cellar to cellar as each previous cellar was destroyed, burning monkeys screamed from the trees, birds with their wings on fire sang from the telephone wires over which desperate calls traveled, I found another shelter, it was filled to the walls, brown smoke pressed down from the ceiling like a hand, it became more and more difficult to breath . . . (Foer 211, see also 213; correction marks omitted).

The cited sentence continues for another half page, giving ever further details of Grandpa’s escape, or chase respectively, through Dresden in a staccato of short phrases. Grandpa’s breathlessness because of his running and the smoke is thus transmitted through the sentence

structure. Jolie A. Sheffer analyzed how the trauma of immigration manifests itself in Mary Antin's 1912 autobiography *The Promised Land*. She argues that immigration is a trauma that is in part caused by displacement, spatial disorientation and confinement (144). Looking into sentences connected by series of semicolons, Sheffer states that "Antin seems to lose control of her narrative" (151) and that "[while] Antin obviously is capable of describing these events [of her immigration], she does not narrate them in a way that retrospectively creates order and meaning" (151). Sheffer's conclusions can be transferred to Grandpa's narrative and consequently underline the connection between traumatization and writing style. His rendition of the bombing starts with relatively short and organized sentences, "The families on our street turned off the lights in their houses and filed into the shelter, I waited on the steps, I was thinking of Anna. It was silent and still and I couldn't see me own hand in the darkness" (Foer 210), and builds up to the afore cited chains of phrases when the narrative reaches the actual bombing. With the growing agitation of the narrator the narrative begins to lose its grammatical structure. Moreover, the inclusion of fantastic elements like pink smoke or birds singing while they are on fire, illustrates Grandpa's inability to offer a coherent narrative. For at least two of the characters the rhetoric of walking thus expresses aspects of their traumatization. Oskar walks because he is afraid of public transport (87), an obvious target for a terrorist attack, and because he feels closer to his lost father during the search (52). Grandpa reflects in his rhetoric of running the overflow of perceptions that cannot be processed deemed typical of trauma. The fact that three characters who suffer from three different traumatic events are depicted as walkers and their walking activity is also related to their traumatization, the act of walking constitutes a link between 9/11, the bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima. Moreover, it produces intertextual connections to other novels dealing with 9/11 or World War II hence reinforcing Foer's approach to consider these two events in conjunction. Oskar's walks across New York evoke Günther Grass' novel *Die Blechtrommel* and hence a narrative dealing with the prosecution of the Jews by the Nazis and the Second World War. Not only Oskar's name constitutes a reference to Grass' protagonist Oskar Matzerath, but also his tambourine, which is an important accessory during his walks across New York City. Both Oskars use the musical instrument to reassure themselves of their identity when they leave their home (Foer 88, 90). Also, the walks conjure up the characters who made it out of the towers and walked away from the World Trade Center, like Keith in DeLillo's 9/11 novel *Falling Man*, for instance. This common feature of novels dealing with 9/11 and World War II or both suggests that these

historical events leave the spared individual being reduced to the most basic capacities, i.e. moving around or fleeing on foot, and to the most basic needs, i.e. finding family members. The walking entities thus emphasize the impact of such traumatic events on the individual which are always the same, no matter when or where the events take place and who the perpetrator or the victim is.

### **Multimodality: Doorknobs as Bridge between Traumas**

The third common formal element of literary psychogeography, which Löffler discusses, is multimodality. According to Löffler, the “use of non-textual modes” is especially noticeable in contemporary literary psychogeography (118). With regard to this feature, the photos included in Foer’s novel take on a psychogeographical meaning, since at least some of them can be argued to “[intensify] the reading experience, but also the experience of the city” (Löffler 119). The photographs of the straining beams of a bridge (Foer 89) or of the front door of the narrowest house in New York (92), which Oskar took apparently during his search for the lock, are examples of how the reader is immersed into Oskar’s experience of New York City. Especially the pictures of the falling man, which are among the very few which appear more than once in the novel, link multimodality to trauma since they represent Oskar’s perception of New York as a city hit by terrorist attacks and thus potentially dangerous as well as the question of how his Dad died. The pictures of the doorknobs can be argued to link the traumas of Oskar and Grandpa and hence the events of Dresden and 9/11. They appear in the letters written by Grandpa (29, 115, 134, 212, 265) and are taken from his blank book as Oskar mentions when he first meets his grandfather (237). Oskar’s grandmother explains that the pictures were taken by her husband for the insurance company because he feared that something would happen to the apartment (174). Grandpa’s obsession with doorknobs apparently stems from the traumatic loss he suffered in Dresden: after the first raid, the only thing left of his family’s house was the front door. When he grabbed the doorknob, it was so hot that it burned the skin off his hand (211). In this scene, Grandpa sees his family for the last time leaving them to look for Anna (211). The doorknobs are thus directly linked to Grandpa’s traumatic experience in Dresden which not only figuratively marked him as becomes clear from his wife’s remark on the roughness of his hands (83). In addition, the novel suggests that also Oskar could have taken some of the pictures of the doorknobs on his search for the lock since he tries the key in all doors he encounters (e.g. 38, 90). The pictures of the doorknobs thus symbolize both searches triggered by trauma that take the characters across the city and consequently link the

underlying traumatic events, namely the bombing of Dresden and the attacks on the World Trade Center.

A special case of the ties between trauma and psychogeographical representation are the red correction marks to be found in the only letter Grandpa actually sends to his son. The letter, which is about the day before and the night of the bombing, includes not only the most direct and circumstantial depiction of a traumatic event in the novel but makes also use of several psychogeographical elements: the movement on foot, the rhetoric of walking, and multimodality. To illustrate this point, I quote from this chapter a passage from the description of the second raid when Grandpa is running from shelter to shelter:

there was a silver explosion, all of us tried to leave the cellar at once, dead and dying people were trampled, I walked over an old man, I walked over children, everyone was losing everyone, the bombs were like a waterfall, I ran through the streets, from cellar to cellar, and saw terrible things (211).

It is notable that the reader who put in the correction marks is especially unhappy with Grandpa's syntax which attests to his breathless running, that is to his psychogeographical writing, and to the overflow of visual information he is unable to process, that is his traumatization. Since the reader who put in the correction marks is Oskar's father whose death is at the core of Oskar's 9/11 trauma, this meta-textual element forms another bridge between the bombing of Dresden and 9/11: In both cases the sons of the victims – one survives, the other does not – struggle to understand what happened.<sup>55</sup> Both sons face the futility of this effort: Oskar's father avoids the direct confrontation with his father and thus the opportunity to get an explanation when he sees him in Dresden but does not disclose his identity (277). Oskar realizes at the end of the novel that collecting more information on 9/11 will not bring his father back. Foer thus highlights that the traumas share the problem of representing them in a manner which the following generations can comprehend. At the same time, he suggests that a representation which allows for complete comprehension might not be possible or even the point.

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<sup>55</sup> The photographs and the correction marks are just two of the meta-textual elements Foer includes in his novel. However, while blank and illegible pages play an important role in the representation of the traumatization of the characters, they cannot be considered part of the representation of a city or other location. Furthermore, they illustrate solely the traumatization of the victims of the Dresden bombings and thus do not link two or more collective historical traumas.

## Blending Space and Subjective Perception

Also, all of the characteristic themes of literary psychogeography listed by Löffler can be found in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. According to Löffler, the blend of fact and fiction, or the fusion of factual and subjective accounts, occurs when topographical references are embellished by “personal descriptions dependent on his [the individual’s] mood, state of mind, or other external factors” (97). This theme is in Löffler’s argument closely linked to another one, the sense of place: “the sense of place denotes the atmosphere and aura of a place which is *individually* felt, and thereby becomes a construct in which individual knowledge, memories, perception and interpretation fuse to become a subjective interpretation of a place” (99–100). The atmosphere or ambiance is “[triggered] by the clash of the external and internal environment, in other words by the fusion of objectivity and subjectivity” (99).

In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, three examples especially illustrate that, by going hand in hand, these two themes often connect topographical descriptions to trauma. Tomoyasu blends topographical facts with her personal experience:

When I reached the Tokiwa Bridge, there were soldiers lying on the ground. Around Hiroshima Station, I saw more people lying dead. . . . I couldn’t tell who was who. . . . I found her [Tomoyasu’s daughter] in horrible condition. And she still appears in my dreams that way” (Foer 188).

Tomoyasu’s account creates an atmosphere of death and chaos; her feelings of disorientation and helplessness were probably shared by other survivors but are not intrinsic to the places she names, they constitute her sense of place. The last phrase of this passage highlights that the described experience caused her nightmares and is at the core of her traumatization.

In a similar manner, the Dresden zoo becomes a place of chaos where “everything was everywhere” (213) for Grandpa, a place where, furthermore, he is forced to kill animals. Due to the chaotic circumstances and the helplessness of the zoo keeper, whose eyes were burned shut by the bombing, Grandpa cannot refuse to shoot the animals, although he suffers from pangs of remorse already during the act as exemplified by his searching for forgiveness in the eyes of an ape he shoots twice (213). The topographical place “Dresden zoo” is thus turned from a place of leisure and animal care into a place of chaos which forces Grandpa to continue the preposterous killing undertaken by the Nazis and the bombings. Grandpa’s subsequent behavior suggests that this part of his traumatic experience haunts him for the rest of his life and that he has become obsessed with making up for his deeds: he feeds the animals in Central Park although it is forbidden (28), he grooms many animals in his apartment (82), writes letters

at the zoo (272), and mentions a “lion eating a flamingo” (272) when he sees the events of 9/11 on TV.

Oskar enriches the topographical location “top of the Empire State Building” in two clearly trauma-infused ways with his own feelings: On his arrival, Oskar’s imagination turns the Empire State Building into the target of an airplane attack which causes explosions, the towers to sway and forces Oskar to decide if he would rather jump or burn (244). Subsequently, he tries to enjoy the view but his emotions taint also this description: “It’s extremely lonely up there, and you feel far away from everything” (245). This last sentence of the introductory quote creates an atmosphere which derives from Oskar’s feelings which in turn are marked by his traumatization. While most people would associate the top of the Empire State Building with feelings like awe, because of the height, romance, because of the many Hollywood movies set at this location, or overcrowding, because of the many visitors, Oskar feels lonely and distanced. Like in a psychogeographical narrative, personal memories and associations of the focalizer lead to an “*emotionalization* and *evaluation* of the focalisers’ spatial surroundings” (Löffler 115; emphasis in original) because of which boundaries between past and present, real and imagined become indistinct (115). An “emotionalization” of New York City can also be traced in the elements which constitute a transfer of Löffler’s theme “dark visions of the city” (101–02) into contemporary American literature. In its original form, this theme includes depictions of “crime and poverty, fear of natural disasters, an exploration of marginal areas, and religious forebodings” (102). Although these characteristics are deduced from 18<sup>th</sup> century literature dealing with London, they can also be found in Foer’s novel, even if in slightly adjusted form, and are also directly linked to trauma. Especially Oskar’s walks bring to light some dark visions of the city which are a product of his 9/11-trauma. As preparation for the search Oskar packs “a topographical map of New York, iodine pills in case of a dirty bomb” (Foer 87) thus expressing his fear not of a natural disaster in this case but of a planned terrorist attack. The same fear makes him walk to all the Blacks instead of taking the subway because public transport is “an obvious target” (194). Oskar’s depiction of New York City as prone to terrorist attacks can be considered a contemporary version of the fear of natural disasters, that is the fear of sudden catastrophes with devastating effects. The novel suggests that Oskar’s panic to use public transport and travel underground was caused by his online searches. It can, however, also be read as a link to two collective historical traumas which took place outside of the United States after the novel’s frame narrative ends in 2003 with Oskar digging up his father’s grave

“about two years” (238) after 9/11: the terrorist attacks on trains in Madrid in March 2004 and on the subway in London in July 2005. Oskar’s fear of a manmade disaster is a psychogeographical element which is clearly triggered by his traumatization. Moreover, it constitutes a special kind of link between collective historical traumas because, in contrast to the other links Foer establishes in the novel, this connection also includes collective historical traumas which are not mentioned in the novel and took place outside of its time frame. This connection contrasts with those which, according to my analysis, are usually created in the novels, since the parallels between these events are relatively obvious and, consequently, comparing them is not a controversial act.

In these text passages, psychogeographical representation becomes hence once again intermingled with trauma symptoms, in this case with Tomoyasu’s nightmares, Grandpa’s feeling of guilt, and Oskar’s post-traumatic loneliness, his drive to invent, and his fear of further attacks. The events of 9/11 and the bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima thus share the impact they have on perceptions of and, consequently, representations of certain topographical locations. The novel hence illustrates how traumatic events influence the subjective construction of space.

In her definitions of psychogeography and of the blending of fact and fiction, Löffler emphasizes the significance of memories for the subjective construction of space. In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, this aspect can only be traced in Oskar’s perception of the Empire State Building which is infused by his recollection of reports he read on the internet, that is by memories of other people. One could even argue that Oskar shows here signs of the “antiquarianism” which Coverley finds typical of psychogeography, that he “views the present through the prism of the past” (Coverley 14). In Grandpa’s post-return mentioning of the Dresden zoo, this aspect is surprisingly absent. It is presented as one of the places where he writes letters to his son (Foer 272). From Grandpa’s post-war behavior one would expect the zoo to be a haunted place for him and not a retreat from which to write letters. That it is not such a comforting place for him after all can only be deduced from the contrast the absence of description forms to the details he gives on the library from which he writes the letter containing the description of the bombing, and from his inability to formulate this decisive letter at the zoo. The library stands on the ground where the shed of Anna’s father used to be and Grandpa’s depiction of it is an example of how a character’s memories contribute to a positive sense of place. He obviously feels comfortable at the library surrounded by books

which he imagines to be the offspring of Anna's father's buried books (208), comfortable enough to finally express what he felt unable to express, namely the traumatic events of the night of the bombing. It can thus be argued that the absence of direct traumatic memories linked to the location's perception allows for a confrontation of the core traumatic experience.

### **Multisensory Traumatic Experiences and Magic Realism: "you can see what it's really like"**

According to Löffler, another typical theme of literary psychogeography is the rendition of multi-sensory experiences (107ff). Following Lefebvre, Löffler argues that for a sustained and conscious experience of a city, which is the main aim of literary psychogeography, not only sight but all senses need to be applied (108). In 18<sup>th</sup> century literature, the "walkers deliberately let multi-sensory experiences affect and influence their perception of urban space" (Löffler 111). The depiction of sensory experiences is a striking feature of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Already the novel's title refers to a hearing experience (extremely loud) and particularly the direct representations of traumatic events abound with sensory perceptions. As I have shown above, Tomoyasu and Grandpa, who move on foot across the city, give – as eyewitnesses – the main explicit representations of traumatic events. The abundance of sensory perceptions in these accounts also brings together literary psychogeographical and trauma representation. Tomoyasu's narrative renders mainly what she sees, for example, skin melting like wax (Foer 187), but includes also the smell of "something similar to grilled squid" (187), the sound of glass shattering (187), dying people calling for their mothers (188) and the cries of her daughter (188). Tomoyasu's perceptions hence contribute to the above discussed sense of place: The bank of the Ota River and all the places Tomoyasu comes across on her way are marked by death, despair and unusual olfactory, auditory, and visual stimuli. Grandpa's depiction of the Dresden bombing is longer and contains more allusions to what he senses: he sees "burning vehicles and carts with burning refugees [sic]" (211; correction mark omitted), explosions of different colors (210-11), "legs and necks" (211), he smells people on fire (214), and "heard a horrible noise" (210) as well as people and animals screaming (211), and birds singing (211), for instance. The fact that sensory perceptions gain significance for the traumatized characters emerges from several other text passages as well. For instance, Grandma does not only see the attacks on the World Trade Center on TV (224-5), but together with Oskar and his mother, smells the smoke (229). The prominence of sensory perceptions hence links the collective historical traumas of 9/11, the bombing of Dresden and the bombing of Hiroshima. The use of fire images in the depictions of all three events exemplifies their commonalities: the smoke on

9/11 (225, 229, 245), during the Dresden bombing (211) and the mushroom cloud over Hiroshima (188) implies certain olfactory stimuli and reduced visibility; burnt bodies (213) and people on fire (211) are seen and smelled by the protagonists. With regard to 9/11, Oskar imagines that, if an airplane would crash into the Empire State Building, “[it] would be getting so hot that [his] skin would start to get blisters” (244), and he would hear the screams of those trapped in the building, some of whom would call for their “Mommy” (244). In this passage, also the tactile sense contributes to the depiction, as it is also the case when Grandpa loses the skin of his hand when he grabs the hot doorknob of his family’s house after the Dresden bombing. During his search for Anna, Grandpa “saw humans melted into thick pools of liquid” (211). Similarly, Tomoyasu saw skin melting like wax (187) while looking for her daughter whose skin is peeling off when she finally finds her (188). In the representations of Dresden and Hiroshima, the images of fire are contrasted by allusions to black water and rain: Tomoyasu does not respond to the interviewer’s question about the black rain – just like she elides his question on the mushroom cloud – even though she brought it up herself. Echoing this report, Grandpa’s odyssey through Dresden ends at the river, whose water has turned black (213). All in all, the depictions of 9/11, and the bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima in particular feature “horrific vivid details of the gruesome destruction of human bodies” (Michael 80). “[By] focusing specifically on violence inflicted on material bodies, the novel elicits from the reader a kind of visceral, bodily empathetic response” and highlights not only what links these collective historical traumas but also what links the victims to all of humanity, namely that “all humans have bodies that are always vulnerable to violence and death” (Michael 77). Moreover, not only humans are affected but also the environment – and, in the case of the Dresden bombing, also animals (213). Foer thereby paints a picture of total depredation and presents especially the bombings as crimes against humanity and nature.

Löffler attributes the emphasis on sensory experiences she finds in her objects of study to the extra-literary Enlightenment discourse of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which “contributed to the contemporary belief that all five senses form the basis of all human knowledge” (112). This is an interesting aspect with regard to *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, a novel which deals with concepts of knowledge and asks questions about the reliability of information and accounts. Oskar’s narrative shows that a “googolplex” number of information does not necessarily lead to insight, neither with regard to his reconnaissance expedition – “The more I found the less I understood.” (Foer 10) – nor to the way his father died – his scrapbook is

completely full, but he still does not know how his father died (325). Too much information can even block insight as the reader experiences when confronted with the staccato of facts and images presented in Grandpa's account of the Dresden bombing (211-14). In discourses dealing with trauma, its definition, its therapy, and its representation, the truthfulness of traumatic memory as well as the possibility to understand the traumatic experience and to represent it faithfully have been object of much debate. Especially regarding the Holocaust, the possibility of historical knowledge has been widely discussed since the beginning of trauma studies. Rothberg distinguishes between two strands in trauma studies: the realist approach which claims that the traumatic event, in Rothberg's argument the Holocaust, is knowable and can be represented in conventional schemata (*Traumatic* 3-4), and the antirealist approach which claims the opposite (*Traumatic* 4).<sup>56</sup> As a novel dealing with trauma *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is necessarily criticized against the background of these discourses. It proposes a different approach to the representation of trauma and to questions of truthfulness and factuality associated with it. To represent the collective historical traumas of 9/11, Hiroshima and Dresden, Foer uses real, extra-literary sources – an interview with a survivor of the bombing of Hiroshima (Saal 461), several actual survivor testimonies of the bombing of Dresden (Saal 465), an image based on a photograph of the falling man circulated publicly (Hirth 356; Däwes 538) and reports by survivors of 9/11 from the internet – and enhances them with fictive elements. These fictive elements mainly emphasize the sensory experience of trauma. According to Saal, Foer took the interview with Tomoyasu verbatim except for the last four sentences (461) which condemn warfare of all sorts. Tellingly, this “authorial statement” (461) ends with the sentence “I thought if everyone could see what I saw, we would never have war anymore” (Foer 189). As also illustrated by the answers in the interview, which depict the bloodshed Tomoyasu witnessed on her walk across the city, the act of seeing, on the one hand, caused the traumatization and, on the other hand, is essential to understand the scale of the suffering – for the real trauma victim Tomoyasu and for the author. In a similar vein, the novel suggests that Oskar needs to fill in the gaps in the chain of events leading to his father's death by more or less imagined sensory experiences of the heat, the tower swaying, or people crying

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<sup>56</sup> See also J. Adams (*Magic* 23-26)).

(244–45), for instance.<sup>57</sup> In Grandpa's depiction of the Dresden bombing, some elements emerge as clearly fictive because of their supernaturalness, like the "burning monkeys" he hears "[screaming] from the trees" (211) or the "roar of that [dead] baby's silence" (213) and the colorful bombs, explosions and flames he sees (210-14). Again, Foer adds sensory experiences to the facts about the traumatic event. Consequently, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* suggests that sensory experiences contribute essentially to the representation and understanding of trauma, even if they have to be imagined to fill in the gaps in reports by actual witnesses.

In the fictive elements Foer adds to represent the collective historical traumas of 9/11 and the bombings of Dresden, sensory experiences are complemented by magic realist features. The "roar of the baby's silence" Grandpa hears, for instance, evokes the ghosts of children present in many magic realist texts, like in the trauma novel dealing with slavery par excellence, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Collado-Rodríguez and Uytterschout ("Extremely"), for instance, have conducted analyses of the magic realist elements in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, and especially Collado-Rodríguez gives a number of convincing arguments for considering Foer's novel in the tradition of magic realism. According to Uytterschout, magic realism "[supernaturalizes] extratextual reality. It is usually achieved by means of two opposite strategies, the rhetoric of banality and the rhetoric of fantasy or – as is the case in Grass's and Foer's novels – a combination of both" ("Extremely" 192). Jenni J. Adams argues in her study dealing with magic realism in Foer's first novel *Everything is Illuminated* that, in the narrative about the annihilation of the Jewish village Trachimbrod, the magic realist elements fill the gap of what is not knowable and, because they are obviously imagined, produce a clear distinction between knowable and unknowable elements of the past (30). As I have shown above, the magic realist elements in Grandpa's depiction of the Dresden bombing similarly add what is not knowable about the traumatic experience and mark these aspects as imagined.

Besides the supernatural details in Grandpa's description of the bombing, relevant magic realist elements in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* are also the reversal of time in

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<sup>57</sup> Oskar mentions having read descriptions of what it felt like to be in der Twin Towers during the attacks of September 11, 2001, on the Internet but it remains unclear to which parts of the imagined terrorist attack he refers. The same holds true for the share in fictive and reality-based parts Foer used in this passage.

Grandma's dream about the bombing and Oskar's flipbook of the falling man.<sup>58</sup> They fulfill three important functions regarding the juxtaposed representation of trauma: First, the magic realist element of time reversal testifies to the traumatized characters' changed perception of time and space. Versluys argues that Grandma's reversed dream of the bombing of Dresden (Foer 306–12) expresses the impact the traumatic events had on her perception of time and space: "In her mind, Dresden has become an absolute event, so totalizing in its impact that it no longer has a definable place in space or time" (Versluys 96). This interpretation of the Dresden bombing as watershed event is backed by Grandma's assertion that the

seven years [between the bombing and meeting her future husband in New York] were not seven years. They were not seven hundred years. Their length could not be measured in years, just as an ocean could not explain the distance we had traveled, just as the dead can never be counted" (Foer 81).

The reversal of the bombing of Dresden in Grandma's dream is echoed in Oskar's reversal of the events leading to his father's death and of the fall of a man who jumped from the World Trade Center on 9/11 (325–41). Oskar's perception of time has also changed, but for him, the events of 9/11 divide his life in before and after ("by then everything was different" (9)) and have become the point of reference for locating the following events: "A few weeks after the worst day, I started writing lots of letters" (11), he meets his grandfather about two years after his dad died (238). Moreover, the reversed order of the events preceding his father's death and of the pictures which depict one possible way in which his father died in the terrorist attacks suggest, that, like for his grandmother, for Oskar the traumatic events are so forceful that they suspend physical laws – or at least require a suspension of these laws to deal with them. Especially for the events of September 11, 2001, a *reversal* of time seems an adequate representational choice since the real events "looked like as if you took some film of a NASA liftoff and ran it backward" (Foster Wallace). Oskar thus arguably restores the "correct" order. The magic realist reversal of time can furthermore be seen as one of "the experimental strategies" (Collado-Rodríguez 57) exponents of the classical trauma discourse, such as Caruth and Whithead, call for to represent the disruption of chronological temporality caused by trauma. It is also through the alleged magical reversal of events and the appearance of a ghost

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<sup>58</sup> Saal problematizes the magical realist element of the depiction of Dresden, considering it a decontextualization of the bombings (465–6) which allows for a victimization of the Germans similar to that of Americans after 9/11 (467).

that the Holocaust resurfaces in the last chapter told by Oskar's grandfather. After having lost track of Oskar during his search for the lock, Grandpa enters a book store on the Upper West Side and encounters a man, who he "thought might be Simon Goldberg" (Foer 279). Since Goldberg had been deported by the Nazis, Grandpa wonders: "had he gone to work instead of to his death?" (279). For Codde, Goldberg's appearance is an invention of Oskar's grandfather's:

Like Jonathan [Foer], like Oskar, and like Oskar's grandmother, Thomas conjures up an alternative past, thereby granting the Jew at Westerbork a different fate than what he is clearly doomed for, enabling him to reenter the story as a ghost haunting the lines between the text" ("Keeping" 683).

Not only because Grandpa admits that he is "almost sure it wasn't him" (Foer 279), but also because Anna's father committed suicide after the war driven by a guilty conscience for not being able to save Goldberg and because of the matter-of-factness of Goldberg's abrupt appearance and disappearance, I agree with Codde that Goldberg's appearance is another imagined reversal of traumatic events in the tradition of magic realism. This magic realist elements thus constitute a major link between the representation of the traumas of 9/11, the bombing of Dresden, and the Holocaust. Second, the magic realist features constitute further intertextual references to Grass' *Die Blechtrommel* and Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. In Grass' novel the representation of historical events is complemented by supernatural elements like Oskar Matzerath's mental maturity at birth, his decision to stop growing – which Foer's Oskar echoes when he drinks coffee because it stunts his growth (Foer 154) –, his ability to shatter glass by singing, or the tin drum's capacity to invoke memories which are not even his own but those of his ancestors – of which the reader is reminded when Oskar Schell plays the tambourine to remember who he is (88). In both novels, the magic realist elements are thus directly linked to trauma: In Grass' novel they express Oskar's protest against the mindset and the events leading to World War II and prevailing in its aftermath, and in Foer's novel, they appear in the depiction of the events of the Second World War and 9/11 as well as in the characters' attempts to deal with them. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the magic realist element of traveling back in time plays an important role in the representation of the bombings of Dresden and other events of the Second World War. Billy Pilgrim, the protagonist of the included book about the Dresden bombings gets "unstuck in time" repeatedly. He not only sees "the late movie backwards, then forwards again", "a movie about American bombers in the Second World War" (Vonnegut 63), but he also finds himself unexpectedly at points of his life in the past. The movie he watches strongly resembles Grandma's reversed dream, and the

protagonist's time travels usually take him back to his military service and imprisonment in Germany during World War II. The magic realist element of time travel hence strengthens the connections between the traumas of Dresden and New York by alluding to other novels dealing with the Second World War. Moreover, by referencing *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the trauma of the Vietnam War resurfaces as subtexts of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Third, the magic realist elements contribute to the special concepts of truth and knowledge Foer puts forward in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Oskar's father's interpretation of the story of the Sixth Borough as well as Stephen Hawking's personal letter suggest (305) that forms of truth and knowledge exist that are independent of scientific scrutiny: In response to Oskar's question whether the sixth borough "objectively" existed, his father admits that "there's no irrefutable evidence. . . . But there is an abundance of clues that would give the wanting believer something to hold on to" (221). In his personal letter to Oskar, which Oskar receives directly after he dug up his father's grave to face the truth that his father is dead, Hawking puts the dichotomy of "real" versus "irreal" altogether into question. He asks, "What's real? What isn't real?" and concludes that "Maybe those aren't the right questions to be asking" (305). Having stated this, Hawking responds to Oskar's worries that he will never stop inventing by suggesting that Oskar is "not inventing at all" (305), hence placing the child's inventions outside of the categories "invented" and "real". Hawking even implies that his scientific findings are less crucial and durable than the work of a poet: "I've been able to explore the origins of time and space with some of the great living thinkers. But I wish I were a poet. . . . I wish I had made things for life to depend on" (305). The novel thus proposes that truthfulness is not the benchmark against which representations of trauma should be measured. Instead, invented or imagined depictions are as valuable as historical facts to comprehend the suffering of those involved no matter who the victims or perpetrators are or when the traumatic event took place. The magic realist passages contribute to this notion because they combine, by definition, realistic and fantastic elements, like the possibility to reverse time or stop a fall and turn it into flight, and they criticize totalitarian discourses of all kinds: "These texts, which are receptive in particular ways to more than one point of view, to realistic *and* magical ways of seeing, and which open the door to other worlds, respond to a desire for narrative freedom from realism, and from a univocal narrative stance" (Faris 180; emphasis in original). Hence, also in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, magic realism is "a specific instance of what Rothberg terms traumatic realism" (J. Adams 28). Rothberg introduced the concept of traumatic realism to

designate, above all testimonial, texts which “[mediate] between the realist and antirealist positions in Holocaust studies” by “[marking] the necessity of considering how the ordinary and extraordinary aspects of genocide intersect and coexist” (*Traumatic* 9). Foer’s concepts of truth and knowledge avoid the dichotomy of realist and antirealist representations of trauma and underline the value of fiction for the representation of traumatic events, among other things by making use of magic realist elements in the representation of trauma. According to Adams, a general function of magic realism is to subvert “existing historical narratives and the epistemological and representational assumptions which underlie” them (21). With his inclusion of magic realist elements, Foer subverts above all the “representational assumptions” of the realist strand of trauma studies and thereby undermines traditional perceptions of the collective historical traumas it deals with. By showing parallels between the traumas of 9/11 and the two World War II bombings, Foer questions in particular the representation of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, as striking an innocent nation out of the blue and as unique in its death toll among civilians.

By contrast with the abundance of sensory experiences in the representations of especially the bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima, another aspect which connects the traumas emerges: the almost complete absence of emotions. In a first-person trauma narrative, one would expect the narrator to experience fear, panic or shock, for instance, but these feelings do not appear in the depictions of the traumatic events. Tomoyasu explains her impression that the people coming toward her “looked like squid” in hindsight as sign of her being “in shock” (Foer 187) and feels sorry for not having helped the other victims she met (188). The only emotion that is implied in her narrative is the fear for her daughter: “My only thought was to find my daughter” (187). Grandpa’s depiction of the bombing of Dresden displays a similar absence of explicit emotions. He concedes that, during the first raid, “it felt like days and weeks, like the world was going to end” (210), after the incident at the zoo, he felt bad because he did not shoot all the vultures (213), and when he finally reached the river, he “was terrified” (214) by his own image not by the events. On four pages dealing with the cruelest deaths and mutilations, there is no evidence of Grandpa being afraid, or feeling anything at all apart from the three above mentioned instances. However, just like Tomoyasu, the novel implies that he is driven by the fear for a loved person. Oskar’s depiction of an airplane crashing into the Empire State Building differs from the two other accounts not only because it is an imagined transfer of the historical events of 9/11 but also because he claims that he would have felt hate towards

the attacker (244). It is questionable whether anyone present in the World Trade Center before and during the crashes felt hate towards the pilots of the planes since the attacks were so unexpected and initially perceived as accidents. Emotions like shock, fear or helplessness thus seem far more likely but play no role in Oskar's imagined version of the events. Oskar's hate is clearly a retrospectively attributed emotion which springs from the consequences of the plane crash, that is the death of thousands of people among whom his own father. It is noteworthy that Oskar ends his contemplation of the question whether he would rather jump from the tower or burn with the realization that "feeling pain is still better than not feeling" (245). With this statement, Foer makes Oskar broach the subject of emotional numbness or suppression of feelings, which are typical symptoms of the post-traumatic stress syndrome.<sup>59</sup> Especially Oskar's grandmother suffers from this symptom as illustrated by her remark that she "didn't feel anything when they showed the burning building" (224–25) on 9/11 and her confession, "I spent my life learning to feel less" (180). However, just like Oskar, who realizes that feeling nothing is not a solution, Grandma, too, must realize that she cannot suppress her feelings forever. When she is alone in her apartment during the night following the terrorist attacks and the loss of her son, her emotions overwhelm her: "I didn't feel empty. . . . I wanted to be empty like an overturned pitcher. But I was full like a stone" (231). Nonetheless, the only depictions of the Dresden bombing presented from her point of view, the dream of the reversed bombing and the dialogue with her father who is trapped underneath a collapsed building, even surpass the other representations of traumatic events in that there are no emotions at all included. Consequently, her father's enigmatic statement that he "can't feel everything" (308) stands out from this passage. His statement offers one possible explanation for the absence of emotions in the trauma narratives: the abundance of feelings which hits the individual in such an extreme situation swamps him or her. This explanation follows one of the basic arguments of the classical trauma discourse which deems the traumatic experience overwhelming and, therefore, inexpressible. Nonetheless, Foer's whole novel counteracts the assumption that the emotions triggered by traumatic experiences cannot be expressed, for example with the therapeutic approach Dr. Fein chooses to deal with Oskar's emotionalness (201) – he makes Oskar keep a diary of his emotions, his feelings book – and Grandpa's above mentioned plan to

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<sup>59</sup> Uytterschout and Versluys deal also with this aspect of PTSD in their analysis of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, I will thus not go into details.

have his wife write down her life story so she will feel better. Moreover, the titles of the chapters narrated by Grandma – “My Feelings” – imply that, at least at the end of the novel’s time frame, she feels the need to communicate her emotions. Seen in light of the above discussed psychogeographical activity of walking, the nonappearance of emotions of fear, horror and the like, can also be interpreted as underlining the impact the traumatic events have on the victims: They are all, independent of their nationality, sex or age, reduced to the most basic capacities and needs, they have to focus on surviving and taking care of their family. Also, their being treated inhumanly takes away an essential part of their humanity, their ability to feel and empathize with others. Moreover, leaving out explicit descriptions of emotional states is a stylistic choice which encourages the reader to empathize with the characters to fill in the gaps in the narrative. Once again, the reader is led to see the similar experiences of the victims and thus question notions of uniqueness.

The analysis of multisensory perceptions in line with the literary psychogeographical approach proposed by Löffler thus unearths several links between the representations of the three collective historical traumas 9/11, bombing of Dresden and bombing of Hiroshima: First, in all three depictions, sensory experiences play a significant role, but emotions are almost completely absent. Second, since the sensory experiences are often fictive elements added by the author to factual reports of the events, they are highlighted as essential for the representation and the understanding of these traumas. Third, due to these fictive adjustments, which draw on magic realist techniques, and the concept of knowledge the whole novel implies, the representations of these three collective historical traumas avoid the dichotomy of realist and antirealist representations of trauma and underline the value of fiction for the representation of traumatic events.

#### **4.5.4. Psychogeographical and Other Links between Traumas versus the Classic Trauma Discourse**

With its combination of magic realist and psychogeographical elements, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* questions the call for the truthfulness of trauma representation voiced by the Caruthian approach to trauma representations. The introductory quote to the close reading of Foer’s novel includes several of the aspects I have dealt with in my analysis and hints at the stance Foer’s novel takes towards further assumptions of the classic trauma discourse. It is taken from Oskar’s visit to the Empire State Building. He voices these insights after imagining a

terrorist attack on the building modeled on the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, and after realizing that “Everything that’s born has to die” (Foer 245). The quote illustrates Oskar’s experience as a walker and combines it with the assessment that seeing is more fruitful than feeling to grasp the meaning of an experience: “It’s like New York is a miniature replica of New York, which is nice, because you can *see what it’s really like*, instead of how it feels when you’re in the middle of it” (245). Obviously, Oskar’s walking experience produced the same problem many walkers encounter. According to Burton Pike, the walker “experiences the city as a labyrinth, although one with which he may be familiar. He cannot see the whole of a labyrinth at once, except from above, when it becomes a map” (9). Intuitively realizing the benefits of seeing the whole picture, Oskar changes the perspective from that of the walker to that of the voyeur, as De Certeau put it in his famous analysis of the activity of walking the city of New York in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Coverley 24). However, despite the distance he puts between himself and the streets of New York, Oskar continues to suffer from trauma-caused feelings of loneliness and constant fear of dying: “It’s extremely lonely up there, and you feel far away from everything. Also it’s scary, because there are so many ways to die” (Foer 245). In contrast to his preceding mentioning of feeling far away from everything (36), that expressed Oskar’s feeling of loneliness, this time, the distance it foregrounds allows for insight and development. This becomes clear from the paragraph following my introductory quote, in which Foer includes the second part of the novel’s title. Oskar views the location of his father’s death: looking through one of the binocular machines on top of the Empire State Building, Oskar can “see things that were far away *incredibly close*, like . . . the gigantic hole where the World Trade Center was” (245) and a man sitting at his desk in an office building who reminds him of his father (245). Due to this “incredibly close” encounter, Oskar is on the brink of tears and wants to head home (247). By contrast, the feeling of being far away allows Oskar to perceive that there are “many ways to die”. This text passage becomes hence linked to the results of Oskar’s Internet search on 9/11 and to the other traumas Foer’s novel deals with. It ends with a note of hope: “But it feels safe, too, because you’re surrounded by so many people” (245). The last sentence exemplifies why many critics found the novel to be a plea for a community of sufferers, “traumatic solidarity” (Mullins), or a transnational approach to commemoration (Däwes; Hornung). The novel offers the activity of walking across the city, meeting people who suffer from various corporal (153, 90), mental (239) or even linguistic (239) impediments, and adopting a different perspective, which includes sufferings apart from

your own, as a way to deal with trauma. This approach is to be seen as the result of a development Oskar went through since he tended to lapse into easy comparisons or hierarchizations of suffering (“when something *really* terrible happened – like a nuclear bomb, or at least a biological weapons attack” (38), “my dad died the most horrible death” (201)) before he goes through the cathartic reliving of his father’s alleged death on 9/11. To achieve this insight, the protagonists need to make use of their senses, which is only possible because “Mr. Black opens Oskar’s eyes”, that is, introduces him to all the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “and Oskar opens Mr. Black’s ears” by turning on his hearing aids (Mullins 320). Oskar’s grandmother also overcomes her corporal impediment, her “crummy eyes,” to communicate her feelings to Oskar, thus emphasizing the need to share the traumatic experience to live on.

Just like the multimodality, the heteroglossia, and the overall structure of the novel allow for different interpretations and support the novel’s message that there is no definitive explanation for anything, the collective historical traumas included are connected in many different ways allowing for very different interpretations of these links. With regard to the novel’s stance toward the classic trauma discourse, I will briefly demonstrate that Foer also uses strategies that are not influenced by spatial concepts: a closer look at the structure of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* – and arguably also its title – reveals a physical proximity of the three main collective historical traumas dealt with, 9/11, the bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima, and the Holocaust. Foer not only suggests a connection between these traumas by putting them next to each other but moreover emphasizes this aspect by placing this close succession in the center of the novel. The chapter “Happiness, Happiness” told by Oskar, is the ninth, and thus the middle one, of the 17 chapters. It starts with the recorded interview of Hiroshima survivor Tomoyasu (Foer 187-90) and Oskar’s subsequent class presentation. It is broken into two parts by the first appearance of the picture of the falling man in the novel (205), and ends more or less with Oskar listening to message four from his father, which contains what should be considered the most straightforward representation possible of the victims’ suffering on 9/11: *I’m underneath a table. Hello? Sorry. I have a wet napkin wrapped around my face. Hello? . . . People are getting crazy*” (207). In-between, Oskar continues his search for the lock and finds out that Agnes Black was also killed on September 11, 2001, because she worked as a waitress at Windows of the World (195), which makes him wonder if she and his dad died together, or, rather, how they died together (196). This chapter juxtaposes the depiction of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 with the bombing of Hiroshima, the story of a son

losing his father with the story of mother losing her daughter. The following chapter is a letter from a father, who will lose his son on 9/11, but at the time of writing, is lost to his son because of his Dresden bombing trauma. It is also the chapter in which Grandpa describes in detail the events of the night of the bombing, to which he alludes right on the first page (208). His recollection of the bombing starts on the following page with the Holocaust, embodied by Simon Goldberg and his need to hide, figuring in the first two sentences:

I went to bring it [the description of their future home] to her [Anna] the next day, on my way to your mothers house, I heard a noise from the shed, from where I'm now writing this to you, I suspected it was Simon Goldberg. I knew that Anna's father had been hiding him (209; correction marks omitted).

On the following page starts the description of the bombing, in which Grandpa loses his lover and unborn child. In the physical center of his novel, Foer hence places in relatively quick succession the representations of the bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima, an iconic image of a man dying on 9/11, a glimpse of what happened inside the towers on 9/11, and allusions to the Holocaust. What links all of the traumas is the stark contrast to the chapter title "Happiness, Happiness" that precedes them. This contrast foregrounds the common history of suffering which links all of mankind – independently of who the perpetrators are and how the victims are killed. This idea is also put forward at the beginning of the chapter when Tomoyasu explains that she wanted to give testimony to show "what death is like" and that it "doesn't matter what uniforms the soldiers are wearing" or "how good the weapons are" (189). In this context, the question of how Oskar's dad died becomes less important since there are so many horrible ways to die and since knowing how your loved one died does not relieve the pain, as the case of Tomoyasu shows.<sup>60</sup>

Moreover, 9/11 becomes linked to a long series of collective historical traumas by the way A.R. Black is introduced: when Oskar meets him for the first time, A.R. Black talks about the Spanish Civil War, the Genocide in East Timor, apartheid, and Tito (154), among other things. He hence lists events from all over the world with severe traumatic consequences for the people concerned. A.R. Black's stories are complemented by his collections of bullets and stones to which papers are attached which indicate their origin, like for example Normandy, 6/19/44; Dallas, 11/22/63; Hwach'on Dam, 4/09/51 (156). Confronted with so many wars,

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<sup>60</sup> In fact, not even knowing means certainty as the reappearance of Goldberg in New York demonstrates.

apartheid, a genocide and other traumatic events, Oskar is overwhelmed and will probably be even more so when he googles all of those events as he plans to do (154). The notion that 9/11 is one catastrophe in a long history of traumatic events is then further supported by Oskar's scrapbook *Stuff That Happened to Me*, which, according to Oskar, contains "[the] whole world" (325). This world is apparently made up of a lot of events which Oskar googled although he knew that they would hurt him (42), like "a soldier getting his head cut off in Iraq" and a man jumping or falling from the World Trade Center (325). It seems probable that among his findings there are also some of Mr. Black's suggestions. Foer thus puts forward the idea that 9/11 resembles those events, a notion also reflected in Grandpa's thoughts on the day of the terrorist attacks. In Dresden, he sees the iconic images of the towers on a TV screen in the window of an electronics store: "the same images over and over, as if the world itself were repeating" (272). This quote is ambiguous: On the one hand, it refers to the endless repetition of the footage showing the airplanes crashing into the buildings and the subsequent fall of the towers for which the medial representation of 9/11 has become notorious. On the other hand, Grandpa's afterthought, "I was the only one who could believe it" (272), suggests that the events of 9/11 are a repetition of previous events, in this case especially the bombing of Dresden. Since Grandpa lived through the bombing of Dresden, he feels that he is the only one who can believe that such things can happen. From his experience, Grandpa also knows that the people in the floors above where the planes hit could not be saved (272). The fact that the two events intermingle in Grandpa's mind becomes clear from his remark that "the sky was filled with paper, pink feathers" (272) which refers to Dresden's present (the flamingos Grandpa sees on another TV screen), Dresden's past (the animals he had to shoot after the first bomb raid) and New York's present (the paper flying around after the collapse of the towers). The two events are apparently so similar that, in Grandpa's perception, they blend into one.

Foer, a Jewish American descendant of Holocaust survivors, chooses to juxtapose the representation of the traumatic consequences of 9/11 to the bombings of Hiroshima and Dresden, only hinting at the Holocaust. He presents 9/11 as one trauma in a long list of historical events that have caused severe suffering for the respective population. To empathize with the victims and see their commonalities, questions of perpetratorship and of the truthfulness of representations are faded from the spotlight. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* hence challenges in particular the classic trauma discourse's assumption of incomparability and the need for truthfulness.

#### 4.6. Interim Conclusions: Spatial and Sensual Experiences of the “World Itself Repeating”

The psychogeographical reading of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* has revealed a number of representational strategies that Foer uses to relate the collective historical traumas the novel deals with. Oskar and his grandparents all produce narratives which bear many features of psychogeography, especially when they represent traumatic events and their impact on the characters' lives. The emphasis on sensual experiences in particular links the collective historical traumas and contributes to Foer's particular juxtaposition of collective historical traumas. Moreover, the psychogeographical reading brought to the fore the role of the magic realist elements in the concepts of knowledge and truth which underlie Foer's approach to representing trauma. With its combination of magic realist and psychogeographical elements, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* questions the call for the truthfulness of trauma representation. Foer furthermore questions traditional assumptions on the incomparability of traumas by highlighting the similar consequences for victims of different historical attacks on human life. They are all reduced to the most basic capacities and needs, they have to focus on surviving and taking care of their family. Once readers and victims see these commonalities, the novel suggests, hierarchizations of suffering are precluded and the question of how to avoid the suffering comes to the fore.

*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* differs from *What You Owe Me* significantly. Not only does it include a higher number of collective historical traumas, which per se circumvents dichotomization and easy comparisons, but its representational choices open up a new field of study that combines space and trauma concepts and includes the analysis of the role of sensual experiences. The challenges to the classic trauma discourse are less pronounced and find rather expression on the level of representational choices than on the linguistic level compared with Campbell's novel.

Finally, the partly drastic depiction of death and suffering caused by man-made traumatic events and certain remarks by the survivor characters warn against “the world itself repeating” (Foer 272) – as Grandma realizes when seeing the attacks on the World Trade Center on TV – with regard to the collective historical traumas depicted but also to those only hinted at and still underway at the time when the novel was written, like the War on Afghanistan. Stopping the repetition of bloodshed as ethical message inherent in the novel finds expression in the realization of Oskar's grandfather that even the “end of suffering does not justify the suffering” (33).

## 5. *Let the Great World Spin*

In this chapter, I explore how McCann's novel *Let the Great World Spin* can productively be analyzed by turning to a theoretical approach so far neglected by trauma studies: network theory. Analogous to the preceding analytic chapters, I will first give a short introduction to the novel, then elaborate on the collective historical traumas it deals with and illustrate which classic trauma discourse elements it uses. The fourth subchapter gives an overview of studies which analyze *Let the Great World Spin* as 9/11 novel. The fifth subchapter is dedicated to the additional theoretical concept I will apply, namely network theory, and the close reading of the novel. It starts with examples and reviews of the novel's network elements. After demonstrating why network theory lends itself to analyzing trauma narratives, I will discuss existing approaches that draw on concepts of trauma and network. The subsequent close reading of *Let the Great World Spin* will combine trauma and network theory in order to reveal how traumas become linked in networks and how special time concepts network theory allows for contribute to forming links between traumas. Before offering some interim conclusions, I will show to what extent the novel criticizes the classic trauma discourse and its assumptions.

### 5.1. Introduction to the Novel

Colum McCann's fifth novel *Let the Great World Spin* was first published in 2009 and won the National Book Award for fiction in the same year. It is subdivided into four books and thirteen unnumbered chapters. The first chapter precedes the first book and is the only one not included in a book. Books one to three all include two chapters in first-person and one or two chapters in third-person narrative limited to a single point of view. Book four consists of only one chapter in third-person narrative. Between chapters eight and nine, roughly two thirds through the novel, a photograph is inserted showing a small figure on a rope between two buildings while a plane flying overhead apparently approaches one of the buildings. The story is preceded by an epigraph, a quotation from Aleksandar Hemon's novel *The Lazarus Project* (2008), and followed by an author's note and acknowledgements.

On the level of content, I distinguish for this paper five partly interwoven plotlines which are each narrated from a plurality of points of view. McCann links the plotlines by different means, such as shared location, recurring characters and themes. The only connection between all plotlines is the performance of a funambulist, which characters either watch, hear or talk about. In the novel, this tightrope walk between the towers of the World Trade Center is

undertaken by an unnamed artist on August 7, 1974, at the same date it was historically performed by French artist Philippe Petit.<sup>61</sup> While the novel is mainly set in New York City in 1974, it also includes memories of the 1950s and 1960s, set, for example, in other parts of the United States and Ireland, as well as a final chapter depicting events in 2006.

Introduced right in the first chapter, the most extensive plotline centers on the preparations for and the act of the tightrope walk. It is above all delivered to the reader in three chapters: in two third-person narratives adopting the funambulist's perspective ("Let the Great World Spin Forever Down" and "The Ringing Grooves of Change") and one chapter narrated from the perspective of the crowd ("Those who saw him hushed"). Furthermore, even though its first-person narrator Sam, "the Kid," works in a computer laboratory in Palo Alto, California, the seventh chapter ("Etherwest") contributes to the picture McCann paints of the tightrope performance by including the account a male and a female eyewitness give to Sam and his colleagues via a public phone in the vicinity of the World Trade Center. Since the funambulist's performance is also recounted by and to other characters and several of them muse on its significance, the tightrope walk appears in ten of the novel's thirteen chapters. Moreover, it is visualized in the only photograph included in the novel.

The second plotline is about a group of five women who all answered a newspaper ad in which one of them looked for other mothers whose sons also died in the Vietnam War. Claire, Gloria, Marcia, Jacqueline and Janet meet in turn at their apartments to share the stories of their losses. Their last meeting, on the morning of the tightrope walk, is depicted in the novel, first, in third-person narrative with the host Claire as focalizer in the third chapter ("Miró, Miró, on the Wall"), then in first-person narrative from the point of view of Gloria in the twelfth chapter ("All Hail and Hallelujah"). An offshoot of this plotline, which also links it to the tightrope walk, is the tenth chapter ("Part of the Parts") which uses a limited third person narration to depict the thoughts and doings of judge Soderberg, Claire's husband, on the day of the tightrope walk. Next to illustrating Soderberg's excitement about the possibility of presiding over the trial of the funambulist and depicting his other cases of the day, this chapter also sheds light on his way of dealing with the loss of his son.

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<sup>61</sup> The novel's story, as also the historical tightrope walk, takes place eighteen months after the official opening of the Twin Towers on April 4, 1973, and thus contrasts with the destruction of the World Trade Center through the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. August 7, 1974, is also the day before President Nixon's resignation due to the Watergate scandal, which is only mentioned in passing in the novel, though.

The third plotline revolves around two Irish brothers living in the Bronx in New York City. One of them, Ciaran Corrigan, is the narrator of the second chapter of the novel (“All Respects to Heaven, I like It Here”). He interweaves memories of their childhood in Ireland with an account of his leaving after a bomb attack in Dublin, in which he was slightly injured, to join his brother John, known as “Corrigan”, in New York City in 1974. Corrigan is a central figure in the novel linking the lives of several characters. As a liberation monk, he feels obliged to take care of the underprivileged residents of the Bronx, such as elderly immigrants and prostitutes, in spite of the deprivation and physical sufferings caused by his altruism and his brother’s lack of understanding. Corrigan’s faith and celibacy are tested when he falls in love with Adelita, a Guatemalan nurse whom he meets volunteering in a nursing home. Adelita is also the first-person narrator of the thirteenth chapter (“Centavos”), which contributes another point of view to the story of the brothers as does also the fourth chapter (“A Fear of Love”). In “A Fear of Love”, the first-person narrator is Lara, a young New York artist. The story she tells is made up of memories of her sixties party life, her drug career and her marriage to another artist called Blaine as well as an account of the couple’s retreat to a cabin in upstate New York where they wanted to become clean and dedicate themselves to painting. This storyline becomes linked with that of the brothers when Lara and her husband kill Corrigan and Jazzlyn, one of the prostitutes, in a car accident. Even though Lara and Blaine abscond after the accident, Lara cannot stop thinking about the dying girl and returns to New York City to search the hospitals for her. When she ends up at Jazzlyn’s funeral, she meets Ciaran with whom she subsequently falls in love and moves to Ireland.

The fourth plotline deals with the life of Tillie, one of the prostitutes Corrigan is acquainted with, and that of her granddaughter Jaslyn. In her first-person chapter (“This Is the House that Horse Built”), Tillie is in jail because she took all the blame for a robbery she and her daughter Jazzlyn, who dies in the car accident with Corrigan on their way home from court, committed some years ago. The narrative of the chapter leaps back and forth between Tillie’s memories of her career as a prostitute, of her daughter’s becoming a prostitute and a drug addict, Corrigan’s arrival in the Bronx, her daughter’s funeral and her life in prison, her self-chastisement for being a bad mother and frequent announcements of her suicide. Tillie’s story is completed by the last chapter (“Roaring Seaward, and I Go”) narrated from Jaslyn’s point of view. Jaslyn is one of Jazzlyn’s two daughters, and thus Tillie’s granddaughter, for whose wellbeing she sacrificed her freedom. In her chapter, Jaslyn remembers growing up with Gloria,

who took the two girls in after her mother died in the car accident and their grandmother was put into prison where she killed herself, and her continuous fear of becoming a prostitute like her ancestors. This plotline tracing the lives of three generations of Black females is thus interconnected with several others: with Gloria's and Claire's, who take over the role of mother and aunt for Jaslyn and her sister, with that of the two brothers, since Corrigan played an important role in Tillie's and Jazzlyn's life and Jaslyn went to see Ciaran in Ireland to find out more about her mother, with that of the tightrope walker, since the photograph is positioned at the end of Tillie's chapter and is carried around by Jaslyn as a keepsake because it was taken on the day her mother died. Moreover, judge Soderberg presides over the trial of Tillie and Jazzlyn – and gives the only account of it in his chapter – and Lara comes to see Tillie in prison to give her some of her favorite books.

A final, less extensive plotline consists of one chapter only ("Tag") rendered by a third-person narrator and restricted to the point of view of a young Chicano named Fernando. The student Fernando spends the summer listlessly working at his uncle's barber shop and passionately taking pictures of graffiti tags while surfing subway trains. The main link of this plotline to the others consists in the picture of the tightrope act which, according to the given copyright, was taken by "Fernando Yunque Marcano" (McCann, *Let* 236).<sup>62</sup> Even though there is no explicit time reference given in Fernando's chapter, some critics argue that it is set on the day of the tightrope performance and that the policemen Fernando follows out of the subway are rushing to the World Trade Center (Cusatis 190; Hones 43).

While the narrative structure of *Let the Great World Spin* is complicated, there are clearly six different first-person narrators: Ciaran (chapter 2), Lara (chapter 4), Sam (chapter 7), Tillie (chapter 8), Adelita (chapter 11), and Gloria (chapter 12). All other chapters are presented in a limited third-person narrative, that is they are restricted to the point of view and thoughts of one character. The focalizers of these chapters are: Claire (chapter 3), the funambulist (chapters 5 and 9), Fernando (chapter 6), judge Soderberg (chapter 10), and Jaslyn (chapter 13). The use of third-person narrative thus differs from the use of first-person narrative in that it repeats one perspective. Furthermore, the first chapter has a special status with regard to its narrative form. Whereas Hones states that "[t]he opening chapter has a conventional third-

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<sup>62</sup> According to Cusatis, the photograph is also a historical fact and was originally taken by "New York Post photographer Vic Deluca" ((190)).

person narrator" (5), I agree with Fogarty, according to whom "[t]he prologue of the novel . . . is written from the viewpoint of a collective subject" (121), this collective subject being the watchers of the tightrope performance. The cited chapter numbers show that there is no discernable systematic according to which McCann alternates first- and third-person narrative. Also, there are no two subsequent chapters belonging to the same plotline. As Mahler puts it, "McCann is constantly changing speeds, adopting different voices, tones and narrative styles as he shifts between story lines".

In the five partly interwoven plotlines McCann deals with several recurring themes, such as grief, criminality, the struggle with religious faith and life plans, immigration and finding home. Often considered a "democratic" novel (Cusatis 174; Cahill and Flannery, "Introduction" 1), *Let the Great World Spin* gives voice to characters from a wide range of social and geographical origins:

The collective ensemble of characters in *Let the Great World Spin* spans a range of social classes but the dominant figures are the urban poor and the criminals spawned by the city, prostitutes, drug dealers, contemporary guerilla artists such as taggers, old people abandoned in homes and directionless emigrants who find an alternative existence in destitute New York neighbourhoods. (Fogarty 5)

The diversity of the novel's cast is not only reflected in the subjects treated but also in narrative style and language, which differ from chapter to chapter. Especially the language used in the chapters told by first-person narrators varies significantly. McCann's characters become round and unique because of their dialects and sociolects. Tillie's chapter is the prime example, standing out because of the very short text passages and its language marked by street slang, prostitution terminology and her social status as Black female. For example, she remembers that "[i]n New York you work for your man. Your man's your daddy, even if he's just a chili pimp . . . I got lucky early on and I found TuKwik. He took me on and I worked the best stroll" (McCann, *Let* 201). Tillie's chapter is also an example of how the novel explicitly broaches the issue of language as sign of education, upbringing, and power. For instance, Tillie makes fun of the bad spelling of the cops who typed her criminal records but is well aware that their lack of education is one reason why they work in the Bronx (198). Another instance in which language is revealed as marker of power and thus hints at several of the concerns of McCann's novel, like discriminatory practices and belonging, is judge Soderberg's repeated chastising and silencing of Jazzlyn and Tillie during their trial (266–73).

Already the title of the novel implies some of the major themes of *Let the Great World Spin*. It was taken from Lord Tennyson's poem "Locksley Hall," written in 1835 and published in 1842, with which the novel shares an interest in the subjects of war, love, loss, and overcoming grief. The poem conveys a soldier's falling in love and losing his beloved to another man for reasons of social constraints. Despite his heart ache the young man, and persona, looks positively into the future repeating two lines about his visions of the world and "all the wonder that would be" (Tennyson 16, 120). Having lost his father in a battle in the "Orient" (154) as a child, the narrator sets out to leave Locksley Hall and travel overseas, take "some savage woman" (168) and spread the scientific and historical achievements of Europe.<sup>63</sup> The title of the novel forms part of a stanza reading "Not in vain the distance beacons. Forward, forward, let us range, / Let the great world spin forever down the ringing grooves of change" (Tennyson 181–82) and expresses the persona's hopes for advancement and change in his new life abroad. Apart from quoting the poem in the title of his novel, McCann cut the same line up into two parts using it as titles for the two chapters about the tightrope walker: "Let the Great World Spin Forever Down" and "The Ringing Grooves of Change". Moreover, the last chapter, told from Jaslyn's perspective, takes its title from the very last words of the poem, conveying the persona's farewell to Locksley Hall: "For the mighty wind arises, *roaring seaward, and I go*" (Tennyson 194).

McCann's referencing of Lord Tennyson's poem has been interpreted in various ways. In the author's note, McCann positions his novel as the most recent successor in a literary line starting with the "Mu'allaqat," "seven long Arabic poems written in the sixth century", which, according to him, heavily influenced Lord Tennyson's poem. McCann points out two lines of the two poems, "Is there any hope that this desolation can bring me solace" from the "Mu'allaqat" and "pilots of the purple twilight dropping down with costly bales" from "Locksley Hall," concluding that "[l]iterature can remind us that not all is already written down: there are still so many stories to be told" (McCann, *Let Author's Note*). Given that the novel's chapters whose titles are taken from "Locksley Hall," namely "Let the Great World Spin Forever Down," "The Ringing Grooves of Change" and "Roaring Seaward, and I Go," deal with the tightrope performance as well as with Jaslyn's living on after the death of her mother and grandmother

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<sup>63</sup> In the interview with Joseph Lennon ("Country"), McCann admits that he feels uncomfortable with the "colonial or territorial implications" of the poem.

and with the moving on of victims of hurricanes Katrina and Rita, I would argue that McCann invokes the common theme of finding beauty in hopeless situations or even the creative force inherent in the wound. For McCann, who, in his artistic work, “[tries] to create from a scratch that has become a deep wound” (Lennon, “First” 161), “[w]hat this novel is trying to talk about . . . is the courage to look at the horror, recognize it, and the equivalent courage that it takes to move on” (Lennon, “Country” 104). This notion resonates also in the chapters dealing with the tightrope act which take their titles from the poem. As Lennon observes correctly, with its location in 1974, McCann’s novel “seems to be less about grieving and more about creation – you have characters at their most daring, at the moment when things are beginning or about to begin – artists pushing frontiers, technicians developing the ARPNET . . . , and characters such as Philippe Petit . . . doing original, daring, and innovative acts” (Lennon, “First” 162). This reading is supported by the imagery of the last page of the novel, in which Jaslyn opens the window of Claire’s room to let light and fresh air enter the room while thinking repeatedly of the world spinning and people stumbling on (McCann, *Let* 349). The imagery thus suggests the possibility of moving on despite all obstacles and “a character’s world opening up” (Cusatis 176) like that of Tennyson’s soldier.<sup>64</sup> Fogarty also understands McCann’s adoption, especially of the line about the world’s incessant spinning, as a positive subtext: “In invoking this line from Tennyson’s poem, McCann connects his novel with the utopian belief in change which it articulates and its eloquent evocation of cosmic time” (Fogarty 120–121). This reading is also supported by Cusatis, even if he is less enthusiastic about the forces that bring about change: “Its [the novel’s] title, taken from Tennyson’s poem ‘Locksley Hall,’ suggests the necessity of accepting the abiding laws that govern the universe and its inhabitants, which although they effect great, often destructive change, also beget life and beauty” (179).

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<sup>64</sup> Cusatis finds another subtext indicating hope and change for the better. According to him, the last chapter of McCann’s novel, set in October 2006, is “a nod to an influential and thematically related literary work, Barack Obama’s *The Audacity of Hope*, which was published that month” (197). Cusatis discovers this intertextual reference not only in the date but also in the description of Jaslyn’s formation, which shows parallels to Obama’s rise (197). In his interview with Stein, McCann points to this subtext stating that Jaslyn is his Obama character (Obama-Figur) who embodies the hope that change is possible.

## 5.2. Collective Historical Traumas in *Let the Great World Spin: 9/11, IRA bombings, Hurricanes, Wars, Racism and Slavery*

The preceding summary has hinted at the collective historical traumas McCann's novel deals with – or at least refers to indirectly. Moreover, almost all characters have experienced individual traumas. Since individual trauma is not the focus of this study, I will only sum up briefly the individual traumas without offering a detailed analysis of the trauma symptoms of the characters: Most striking is the fact that almost all characters have to deal with the loss of a beloved friend or family member. Gloria, Claire and her husband as well as the other women from the group have lost one or several sons; Tillie has lost her daughter and never knew her father (like Fernando); Ciaran, Corrigan, and Jaslyn have lost at least one parent; Adelita has lost her husband and her lover. Furthermore, the prostitutes Tillie and Jaslyn were repeatedly abused by their pimps and suitors.

Right from the beginning of the novel, McCann situates his story in a frame of collective historical traumas ranging from the 1970s to the 2000s.<sup>65</sup> Already in the first chapter he alludes to the events of September 11, 2001, as well as explicitly referring to the IRA (5) and the Vietnam War (6). In the following chapters, the reader encounters characters directly or indirectly affected by IRA bombings, slavery and racism against Black Americans, 9/11, World War II, the Vietnam War, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the hurricanes Rita and Katrina.<sup>66</sup>

### 9/11

Even though not once mentioned explicitly, the collective historical trauma of 9/11 looms large in the novel. The most direct references to it can be found in the chapter set in 2006 in which Jaslyn muses on the picture of the tightrope performance and its prophetic quality with regard to later events (McCann, *Let* 325). Also in this chapter, McCann emphasizes the impact

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<sup>65</sup> One could argue that the range is even wider since the epigraph is taken from *The Lazarus Project*, a novel dealing with racism against Jews, especially from Eastern Europe, in the USA at the beginning of the 20th century and even earlier in Eastern Europe. Moreover, the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s play a significant role in the quoted novel.

<sup>66</sup> McCann also mentions that Gloria's family was hit by the Great Depression (285) which in Smelser's understanding is one of the "historical events [which] qualify as both socially and culturally traumatic" since "[i]n addition to its disruptive social effects, it also constituted a crisis for the culture of capitalism" ("Psychological" 38). Since the Great Depression is usually not counted among the collective historical traumas, is only mentioned in passing in the novel, and does not play a role in the interconnection of traumas I want to point out, I do not consider it here.

of 9/11 by depicting the strict and humorless safety measures at US airports in its aftermath (326–27).

### **The bombings of the IRA and The Troubles**

The fight of the IRA against British occupation is mentioned twice in *Let the Great World Spin*, possibly reflecting the author's Irish origins. In the first chapter, the crowd watching the tightrope performance wonders if the funambulist is an IRA man (McCann, *Let* 5). In the second chapter, the reader learns that Ciaran has left Dublin for the United States because he was slightly injured by an IRA bomb (22). Apart from the urge to leave the country right away, Ciaran does not seem to be deeply affected by this experience, and this certainly traumatic topic for Great Britain and Ireland is not explicitly taken up again by McCann in this novel.

### **The Hurricanes Rita and Katrina**

McCann closes the novel focusing on Jaslyn, whose work is to support victims of the hurricanes Rita and Katrina, and relating a story told to her by a survivor (McCann, *Let* 337–38). At first glance, the hurricanes seem to belong to a different category from the traumas mentioned above because they are no man-made disasters. I will nonetheless include them in my argument for four reasons: First, the hurricanes can be considered collective historical traumas due to the devastating consequences for a high number of people and to the way they are treated by media<sup>67</sup> and state officials. Second, McCann obviously considered Katrina on a par with other historical events, like the Guantánamo Bay camp (Hemon, "Aleksandar"), which caused, in Hemon's words, "pain and suffering and humiliation" (Hemon, "Aleksandar") and thus need to be written about. This assessment is expressed in the novel when Jaslyn notices "on TV news of 6 dead in Iraq, no hurricanes" (McCann, *Let* 340) thereby emphasizing the equality of war and hurricanes. Third, and as a logic consequence of the precedent point, McCann depicts Jaslyn's clients as classic trauma victims as will become clear in the following. Finally, especially Katrina's status as natural disaster is highly controversial. As Janet Walker, for example, shows, most of the devastating and traumatic consequences of the hurricane's landfall can be traced back to human failure and racist policies, hence questioning the label natural disaster. To name just two major arguments: the population, which suffered most from

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<sup>67</sup> In his interview with McCann, Hemon argues, for instance, that "the tragedy of Katrina was broadcast live".

deaths and material losses, was mainly poor and Black due to “racial and economic discrimination” (Walker 49) in New Orleans which led to unfavorable housing policies. It were then also “mainly the poor of whom most, in New Orleans, are black” who were scattered across the US and for whom “the act of return [was] immeasurably difficult or impossible” (Walker 49).<sup>68</sup>

## Wars

War is a recurring concern of the novel. McCann repeatedly refers to different aspects of the Second World War explicitly and implicitly: The Holocaust is explicitly referenced in one passage, even though without apparent effect on the story, and implicitly by Claire’s mentioning of “death by genocide” (McCann, *Let* 113). The Second World War is also the reason for the death of two of Gloria’s brothers (McCann, *Let* 289) and a recurring topic of conversation while Gloria is at college (302). Furthermore, it is alluded to implicitly in Claire’s comparison of the Bronx with Dresden (82) and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, as one significant event of World War II, is doubly brought up (21). Apart from the Second World War, a number of other wars play a role in *Let the Great World Spin*: The reader learns that Adelita’s husband died in the war in Guatemala fighting for the fascists (54).<sup>69</sup> Jaslyn appears to be especially sensitive to the subject since she refers to several wars in her chapter. She mentions that her visit of her sister in Ireland took place “shortly after the attacks on Afghanistan” (341), she notices news of the Iraq war in the media (340), and includes an anecdote about her sister’s work in the Baghdad embassy (343). Even the Italian Jaslyn meets on her flight to New York works as a doctor in a mobile clinic for veterans (328). Among the wars referred to in *Let the Great World Spin*, the Vietnam War plays a special role since almost all characters are in some way connected to it: Claire and Gloria lost their sons in it, Sam’s colleagues are veterans (175) and they develop a program to be used by the military in Vietnam, Lara’s ex-boyfriend returned wounded and her husband made an art film about Vietnam (123), Tillie helps the soldiers on home leave to forget (208), and even for the priest Corrigan McCann establishes an intertextual link to the Vietnam War since he “based Corrigan on the poet and radical Jesuit priest Daniel

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<sup>68</sup> Walker also mentions that some commentators and victims saw a parallel between the scattering of Black evacuees across the US and slavery’s break-up of families (51, note 12 on page 60).

<sup>69</sup> McCann’s inclusion of the so-called civil war in Guatemala constitutes an interesting parallel to Krauss’ novel since Guatemala was apparently the first Latin-American state in which forced disappearances were used by the government against the opposition (McAllister 280, Scovazzi and Citroni 2).

Berrigan, known for his social and political activism, particularly during the Vietnam War” (Cusatis 183).

### Slavery and Racism

A cluster of historical traumas that runs like a thread through *Let the Great World Spin* includes slavery, racism, and segregation. It has been amply argued that racism should be considered traumatic for those subjected to it, even though racism does not fit the punctual model of trauma assumed by the Caruthian discourse. The way racism is depicted in *Let the Great World Spin* recalls Forter’s argument for the existence of “social”, or even more fitting systemic or structural trauma, that is traumatization induced by consistent exposure to abuse and malpractice. Set in 1974, that is ten years after the official abolition of segregation by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, McCann’s novel depicts a US society in which racist thinking and behavior is still widespread despite a heightened awareness of racial issues. Their experiences with racist attitudes influence the behavior of the Black characters Gloria, Tillie, and Jaslyn, and their understanding of the world. Racism is hence above all a recurring topic in the two chapters adopting the perspective of the Black characters Tillie and Gloria, two of the novel’s characters who experienced segregation and the civil rights movements first hand. Tillie, for example, recalls racism among prostitutes and pimps (McCann, *Let* 201) as well as being harassed by the police because of her skin color (205). Gloria remembers her childhood in a segregated town (285), being an outsider or even an object of virtue at college (302–03), and freedom riding (289). Moreover, in the novel’s present, she experiences discrimination from the police (300), taxi drivers (300), and the other mothers, who “had the white-woman language going between them” (291), for example. In the chapter on Jaslyn, the ongoing of racist thinking, practices and stereotypes in the 2000s becomes apparent from her realization that “[s]he has grown tired of the people who tell her that she’s not a normal African-American” (327). In Ireland, she is also called “nigger” (327). McCann furthermore reconnects the continuity of racist thinking and practices, which apparently took similar forms before, during and after the 1970s and in the 2000s, to slavery. This is highlighted in the preacher’s speech at Jazzlyn’s funeral, for example, in which he insists that Jazzlyn was forced to become a prostitute and do vile things because “[s]he was under the yoke of tyranny. Slavery may be over and gone, he said, but it was still apparent” (145). The inclusion of Gloria’s family history in the novel also brings this point home since the actions of Gloria’s mother as well as Gloria’s actions in the 1970s were apparently heavily influenced by the enslavement of their ancestors. Both women are depicted as fiercely

defending their independence and the possibilities their ancestors could not benefit from (286). The characters' behavior hence suggests an ongoing traumatization because of racist practices they and their ancestors had and have to suffer from.

### 5.3. Classic Representations of Trauma in *Let the Great World Spin*

Dealing with several collective historical traumas *Let the Great World Spin* classifies as a trauma narrative in the sense of classic literary trauma studies not only on the level of content but also in its approach to representing trauma.

#### Metaphorical Depiction of Trauma

The prime example of classic trauma representation in *Let the Great World Spin* is the metaphorical depiction of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center. Although McCann never actually mentions 9/11, he interweaves allusions to it into the narrative right from the beginning of the novel. According to Hones, the opening lines of the novel evoke 9/11 because the names of the streets in which the people gather to watch the funambulist (McCann, *Let* 3) are linked to the attacks in US memory:

While it is historically accurate that these were, in 1974, the streets on which commuters stopped, watched, craned their necks, and marveled at the Petit wirewalk taking place 110 stories above them, these same street names in 2009, when *The Great World*<sup>70</sup> was published, were more powerfully associated with the 9/11 attacks (Hones 56).

McCann drops further hints in the following pages. The reader learns that the crowd watches the two towers (3) of the World Trade Center (6) which, in typical trauma discourse language, has been "wounded" by an assault: "the far tower, still wrapped in scaffolding, like a wounded thing" (7). The novel hence takes up the special symbolic role the "anthropomorphized 'twins'" (Bennett, "Tenebrae" 186) played in the representation and the memorialization of the terrorist attacks. McCann furthermore creates an atmosphere reminiscent of 9/11: He repeatedly mentions sirens of police cars and fire trucks (5) and apparently stressed security and police staff running around (6).<sup>71</sup> Moreover, McCann draws on typical 9/11 terminology when repeatedly using "fall", a term connected to some of the

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<sup>70</sup> Hones uses this abbreviated title in her analysis to refer to *Let the Great World Spin*.

<sup>71</sup> Hones detects also a repeated mentioning of dusk and its use to illustrate pervasive fear as reminiscent of 9/11 (57-8).

most often cited images of the attacks on the World Trade Center, such as the coming down or “falling” of the towers, and the videos and pictures of people who jumped from windows to flee the inferno inside the towers.<sup>72</sup> Tellingly, the reader is informed that “a single pigeon swooped down from the top floor of the Federal Office Building, as if anticipating the fall” (5). In the novel, it remains unclear which “fall” is meant though, the fall of the funambulist standing on the observation deck of the south tower or one of the aforementioned 9/11-related falls. In any event, the crowd apparently “really wanted to witness a great fall” (6), a wish which almost becomes true when, in a more explicit reference to the people jumping from the towers on September 11, 2001, “[a] body was sailing out into the middle of the air” (7) and the crowd anticipate the “thump” (7) of the body hitting the ground – a sound described as traumatic by many witnesses of the terrorist attacks and appearing in several 9/11 novels, like Jess Walter’s *The Zero*, for instance. In this case, however, not a person but only a sweatshirt is “falling, falling, falling” (7). The theme of falling is repeatedly taken up in connection with the tightrope performance. To name just a few examples, in the first chapter told from the perspective of the funambulist (“Let the Great World Spin Forever Down”), being trapped in the snow after jumping off the exercise tightrope in the woods, he contemplates on the thaw, “the slowest sort of falling” (160). He furthermore put up a sign at the door of his cabin reading “NOBODY FALLS HALFWAY” (160). McCann’s depiction of the tightrope walk thus picks up several typical 9/11 images and the atmosphere prevailing on that day as described by Marianne Hirsch, for example: “The event marked us visually at the time, as people watched live, and then in unremitting replay, planes hitting towers, towers falling, people jumping, running, screaming” (“Took” 71).

Apart from the allusions to the 9/11 symbol of the falling man, the shared location of the World Trade Center, and the atmosphere reigning in New York, the performance is suggested as a metaphor for 9/11 by the sentence the artist receives for his performance, by the similarity of the included photograph with famous pictures of the terrorist attacks, and by the reaction of the onlookers. According to Cusatis, the walker’s being sentenced to perform for children

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<sup>72</sup> I discussed the special significance of the falling people for 9/11 novels in detail in my Magisterarbeit attributing the appearance of them in so many 9/11 novels (*Falling Man*, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, *The Zero*, *The Writing on the Wall* and also *Let the Great World Spin*) to different factors, such as the immediacy of people dying in contrast to the impossibility to know what happened inside the towers, opposition to the ban imposed on images of them for reasons of sensitivity, and consequently criticism of the way in which government and media censored information on the attacks.

(McCann, *Let* 318) is “a nod to 9/11, since Philippe Petit was invited to do the same thing after the towers fell” (Cusatis 193). The photograph of the performance included in the novel is, as mentioned in the afterword, a real picture taken by Vic DeLuca and is publicly available on the Internet. It links the performance to 9/11 because it includes a passenger airplane in the background which seems to be heading toward one of the towers of the World Trade Center. This picture conjures up images any google search on 9/11 produces and the worldwide coverage of the attacks repeated millionfold, hence forming part of what Susan Sontag calls the “image-world” (Sontag 151) of our time.<sup>73</sup> In the novel, Jaslyn comments on the similarities between the pictures and the differing development of events in 1974 and 2001: “A man high in the air while a plane disappears, it seems, into the edge of the building. . . . We wait for the explosion but it never occurs. The plane passes” (McCann, *Let* 325). Finally, people’s responses to the tightrope performance elucidate its function as a metaphor for 9/11 since they resemble those typically elicited on the day of the terrorist attacks, namely disbelief and anxiety. In the novel, two characters in particular utter their disbelief: José, one of the watchers Sam and his co-workers call via a pay phone, cannot believe what he sees (181), finds it “[u]ntrue” and “[t]his guy . . . unfuckingreal” (183). Judge Soderberg sees the performance as emblematic of the city of New York which “assailed you with an image, or a day, or a crime, or a terror, or beauty so difficult to wrap your mind around that you had to shake your head in disbelief” (247), a disbelief so strong that even the sophisticated judge asks himself, “can you possibly fucking believe it?” (249).<sup>74</sup> Flannery discovers a “disjuncture between vision and comprehension in the presence of this acrobatic feat” (*Colum* 210) thus linking disbelief to the inability to understand typically attributed to trauma victims. Also in representations of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the notion that what was happening could not be real and / or is incomprehensible prevails. In Schwartz’s novel *The Writing on the Wall* (2005), for example, the main character states that on 9/11, “the world turned surreal” (172). Many witnesses – real and fictitious – expressed disbelief at what they saw by the often quoted

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<sup>73</sup> Examples: [http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2011/09/08/article-2035160-0056B7DC00000258-46\\_468x286.jpg](http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2011/09/08/article-2035160-0056B7DC00000258-46_468x286.jpg), <http://www.zeitpunkt.ch/uploads/pics/9-11.jpg>

<sup>74</sup> The anonymous crowd of the novel’s first chapter utter more subdued cries of astonishment: “Wow or a Gee-whiz or a Jesus H. Christ” (McCann (*Let* 4).

comparison to Hollywood blockbusters (it was just “like a movie”, e.g. in Foster Wallace’s essay, or DeLillo’s and Foer’s 9/11 novels). Claire Kahane explains this phenomenon as follows:

even in real time, knowing that we were watching a unique act of devastation, the scenes before our eyes seemed familiar and unreal. For even as the historical event unfolded, it was quickly recognized, placed in a familiar category, and given a local habitation and name: “it’s just like a movie” . . . In this assimilation, as we turned to the movies to orient us to the real disaster, the historical was confused with the fictional, and the event of 9/11 itself – familiar and unfamiliar, real and unreal – took on an uncanny ambiguity. (107)

Kahane’s explanation considers the “it’s just like a movie” simile as an attempt to bring together the “familiar” and the “unreal” by putting an ungraspable event into a known category; it is thus a reaction linked to the unbelievable nature of the events. Anxiety, by contrast, is in McCann’s novel above all experienced by Claire, Gloria, Marcia, Jacqueline, and Janet, who struggle with the uncertainty about the artist’s fate. For them, “the worst thing was that they didn’t know the walker’s fate, didn’t know if he had jumped or had fallen or had got down safely” (McCann, *Let* 99). This reaction is similar to especially that of those people who were worried about friends and relatives who were inside the World Trade Center when the attacks occurred. This aspect is hence also an intertextual reference to Foer’s novel since it is reminiscent of Oskar’s obsessing about the way his father died on 9/11.

The tightrope walk’s function as a metaphor for 9/11 has been amply discussed; critics and analysts widely agree on the performance’s meaning, even if they give partly different reasons. Detailed analyses of McCann’s development of the tightrope walk as a metaphor for 9/11 can be found in Hones’ (56-9) and Cusatis’ studies (183), for example. Cusatis states, for instance: “If the mass of lifted, awestruck faces is not enough to suggest this is a novel about 9/11, McCann introduces one of many ironic suggestions of the future, comparing the far tower to ‘a wounded thing waiting to be reached’” (183). He thus finds links between 9/11 and the novel’s depiction of the tightrope act in the watcher’s response and in the language describing the towers by use of trauma terminology (“wounded”). Flannery, too, situates the link between the terrorist attacks and the tightrope act on the level of visual perception: “Vision, spectacle and sightings provide a link between the opening act of funambulism in *Let the Great World Spin* and the brute spectacular of 9/11” (*Colum* 209). Hones discerns similarities between the events of 9/11 and the walker’s performance on different levels since they were both “unsanctioned, dangerous, and clandestine” and took place on the same location (5). Schober argues more along the lines of McCann’s own claims in interviews, such as “the tightrope walk popped out of my memory . . . and I thought, What a spectacular act of creation, to have a man

walking in the sky, as opposed to the act of evil and destruction of the towers disintegrating” (Johnston), which emphasize the contrary connotation of the two events. For her, the tightrope walker constitutes a “counter-figure to the image of the ‘falling man’” (Schober 392), the aforementioned symbol of the victims of the terrorist attacks. The tension between the two at first glance opposite connotations of the two events – terror vs. art, creation vs. destruction – in my view reinforces the power of the metaphor bringing to mind debates about Stockhausen’s declaration that the attacks were “a piece of art” and leaving the reader wonder about other possible reactions to 9/11, that is reactions other than waging war, which also aims at destruction.<sup>75</sup>

The function of the tightrope performance and of the imagery of falling as allusions to 9/11 is amplified by intertextual references to the two 9/11 novels *Falling Man* by Don DeLillo and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer. The reference to *Falling Man* consists mainly in the two novels’ shared interest in two street artists who, through their performance, become related to the events of 9/11. In McCann’s novel, the tightrope walk between the towers of the World Trade Center brings up memories of 9/11 because of its setting, the position of the watchers, its relation to falling, and the atmosphere created in the novel. In DeLillo’s novel, a fictional performance artist known as “Falling Man” shocks New Yorkers in the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center by imitating the fall of the people who jumped from the towers for fear of the flames and hence conjuring up memories of 9/11. His performance consists in jumping from public or private buildings protected by a safety harness and then remaining in midair headfirst, supported by several straps, for a short time. When Lianne, one of the novel’s characters, tries to find out more about the Falling Man on the Internet she discovers a discussion about the position the artist assumes in his fall:

There is some dispute over the issue of the position he assumed during the fall, the position he maintained in his suspended state. Was his position intended to reflect the body posture of a particular man who was photographed falling from the north tower of the

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<sup>75</sup> The idea that terror is a form of art also resonates in Ciaran’s comment on the Dublin bombings: “Everyone in Dublin was a poet, maybe even the bombers who’d treated us to their afternoon of delight” (McCann *Let* 32). This notion seems to form part of one of the main recurring themes in the novel, namely that there is beauty in all sorts of events, situations and people. The prostitutes, for example, are presented as beautiful and as artists, even if only “rip-off artists” (65), and the tightrope performance as an “attempt at beauty” (103). The description of the car accident suggests that the van is “a dancing thing, elegant for a split second” (69), Joshua’s acts of programming are “the deepest sort of beauty” (88).

World Trade Center, headfirst, arms at his sides, one leg bent, a man set forever in free fall against the looming background of the column panels in the tower? (DeLillo 281)

The performance was inspired by a photograph, which exists also in the extra-literary world, of one of the people who jumped from the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. This constitutes another parallel to the tightrope performance since the photograph of the latter included in the novel is also not fictional and one significant link to 9/11. Moreover, in both novels the artistic performances stand symbolically for trauma in general. Like a traumatic experience, and also like the flashbacks and nightmares caused by such an experience, the Falling Man “seem[s] to be coming out of nowhere” (DeLillo 201). His appearance thus recalls the unexpectedness of the traumatic experience and also the perseverative nature of traumatic memories since he, too, reappears unexpectedly (all in all three times throughout the whole novel). Similarly, the tightrope walk takes the passersby by surprise, as their cries of astonishment (McCann, *Let* 4) as well as the reactions of those characters who hear about it, like Soderberg (247), show. Linked to the unexpected appearance of the performances is another parallel to the trauma that they share, namely their being ungraspable in the literal and in the figural sense. Especially for the police, the funambulist is literally ungraspable because of his position on the wire (241) and his skills at unshackling himself (243). In a figurative sense, characters feel unable to understand what he is doing. Similarly, in DeLillo’s novel, Lianne has to realize during her online search that the Falling Man is ungraspable and has troubles understanding what is happening: “Why is he doing this, she thought” (DeLillo 202). The two performances thus assume similar functions in the two novels.

Foer’s novel also deals with a falling man: in the pictures in Oskar’s flipbook and in Oskar’s recurrent wondering whether he would have jumped or burned if he had been caught in one of the towers. However, the intertextual references McCann intersperses in his novel exceed this symbol: Two of *Let the Great World Spin*’s characters share Oskar’s concern with the birds which die because they crash into the towers of skyscrapers, like the World Trade Center (*Let the Great World Spin*) or the Empire State Building (*Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*). In both novels the information about the birds is related to 9/11. Oskar happens upon it in his attempts to find out more about how his father exactly died during the attacks of September 11, 2001. In McCann’s novel it is linked to the performance of the tightrope artist and thus to 9/11 twice: Claire compares the death of the birds with the possible slipping and falling of the funambulist: “What if he hits somebody down below? She has heard that at night there are whole colonies

of birds that fly into the World Trade Center buildings, their glass reflection. The bash and fall. Will the walker thump with them?" (McCann, *Let* 105). The funambulist offers a similar explanation for the birds' deaths when, during the preparations for his performance, he encounters a woman picking up the dead bodies of the birds at the base of the towers:

She was putting the dead birds in little Ziploc bags. . . . They migrated late at night, when the air currents were calmest. Dazzled by the building lights, they crashed into the glass, or flew endlessly around the towers until exhaustion got them, their natural navigational abilities stunned (162).

Readers of both novels will certainly be reminded of Oskar telling Mr. Black and Ruth, the woman living in the Empire State Building, that "[d]uring the spring and autumn bird-migration season, the lights that illuminate the tower [of the Empire State Building] are turned off on foggy nights so they won't confuse birds, causing them to fly into the building" and that "[t]en thousand birds die every year from smashing into windows" (Foer 250).

By avoiding direct references to the terrorist attacks, McCann recurs to the indirect or metaphorical fashion deemed suitable by the Caruthian trauma discourse to represent 9/11. Since no less than nine of *Let the Great World Spin's* thirteen chapters and eight of its twelve narrating voices refer to the performance of the tightrope walker, this metaphorical representation of 9/11 makes also use of the different points of view and shifts in narrating voice stipulated by Caruth's approach to add ever new details to a dispersed story.

Similarly to the references to 9/11, McCann uses the classic approach for the representation of the traumas caused by the Vietnam War. Again, the novel does not depict any events of the war directly and in detail – with the exception of short retrospective accounts of the deaths of the sons of Claire (McCann, *Let* 112) and Marcia (96) – but usually alludes to it via well-known symbols, such as the helicopter, or names of places, like Saigon (86), which stand as *pars pro toto* for the war. The metaphoric representation of trauma is one way of accommodating the difficulties of expressing trauma stipulated by Caruthian theory. Another accepted technique of mimicking trauma in the narrative structure, which is applied in *Let the Great World Spin*, is the postponement of naming the underlying traumatic experience. In the chapter on Gloria, for instance, the death of her sons is hardly a topic. The reader deduces that she has lost her sons in the Vietnam War from the fact that she takes part in the group meeting at Claire's but Gloria mentions only fleetingly that she asked Claire if she thought their sons were friends (293) and that she was worried about being robbed of the pictures of her sons (308). It comes as a surprise, then, when Gloria declares after almost four fifths of the chapter,

which mainly deals with the racism her family and herself had to face: “It was Vietnam that brought me to my knees. In she came and took all three of my boys from right under my nose” (313).<sup>76</sup> The reader never finds out how Gloria’s sons died. The longest text passage dealing with them ends with the brief conclusion that “[n]one of them came back” (313) and is followed by a description of Gloria’s strategies to repress the hurtful memories, which can be read as an explanation for the lack of information given. In a similar vein, Claire avoids mentioning her son’s death in the chapter told from her perspective. The reader is led to suspect that something is wrong right from the beginning of the chapter because of Claire’s wondering about hair growing after death (74), the imagery of haunting linked to the memory of a present from her son (75), and her meeting with a group of mothers one of whom lost three sons (76). It takes almost the whole chapter though until the reader learns how Claire’s own son died in Vietnam through Claire’s recounting to the other women how a sergeant arrived at her apartment to tell her and her husband that their son “is passed” (110). Before this occurrence Claire only hints at the fact that her son is dead and that he died as a soldier in Vietnam:

No newspapers big enough to paste him back together in Saigon. (81)

Joshua became code.

Written into his own numbers. (89)

Mother seeks bones of son. Found in blown-up café in foreign land. (90)

In the tradition of classic trauma narratives, these hints are triggered by more pleasant memories, like, regarding the first quotation, Joshua shaving for the first time, and are followed by descriptions of the painful grief they caused. McCann’s narrative thus mirrors the traumatic experience in typical trauma narrative style by circling around the core trauma and postponing its direct representation.

### Apathy

The traditional approach to representing trauma is also evident in the way McCann marks characters as traumatized by attributing symptoms of PTSD to them. In the following I will give some examples of characters suffering from apathy, repression, withdrawal, difficulties with language, the feeling of being haunted, a disturbed perception of time, and fragmentation.

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<sup>76</sup> One could argue that racism functions as a sort of screen memory (*Deckerinnerung*) for Gloria which helps her avoid the even more hurtful memory of the death of her three sons. This line of argument is not relevant for my general argument, however.

Claire, for instance, lapses into a state of apathy after receiving the news of Joshua's death: "She lay two months in bed. Hardly moving" (McCann, *Let* 89). In her desperation, Claire even hopes for the numbing effect of smoking since "cigarettes are good for grief. One long drag and you forget how to cry" (81). A more severe case of post-traumatic despair is expressed by a woman Jaslyn meets after the hurricanes. After finding out about her son's death, the woman wished to be dead: "I wish I woulda drowned right there and then" (338).

### Repression

By resorting to the repression of painful memories, Gloria embraces another typical strategy adopted by trauma victims to free themselves from grief and desperation. After her sons were killed in the Vietnam War, she starts listening to opera (McCann, *Let* 314), eating in abundance and watching soaps so as not to remember:

I guess I ate. I suppose that's what I did. I ate whatever I could. Alone. Surrounded by packets of Velveeta and saltines, trying hard not to remember, switching channels and crackers and cheeses so the memories didn't get me. . . .

The only thing that ever rescued me was listening to a big voice. . . . I sometimes turned the stereo so loud the neighbors complained. . . . I wouldn't even look at myself in the mirror. But there was a medicine in it. (314)

This quotation is telling of Gloria's strategies of repression and her feeling alone with the traumatic experience so often considered typical of trauma victims.

### Withdrawal from Reality

The quoted passage also shows also that Gloria withdraws from reality because of her traumatization. In similar fashion, Jaslyn's reaction to being called a "nigger" in Ireland evokes classic trauma discourse's imagery of withdrawal from reality when "[s]he found herself pulling into a shell, unable to listen" (McCann, *Let* 341). Another way of withdrawing from reality is brought up by Claire who retreats into a state she calls daydreaming when remembering her son (108), a state also the other mothers are familiar with, they "know the feeling" (108). Gloria even admits that she can no longer dream at night but starts daydreaming right away in the morning (108). Gloria makes use of different strategies of withdrawal to deal with traumatic incidents and memories. Apart from staying at home and listening to music, watching soaps and daydreaming, she knows how to distance herself and find security in situations in which she faces racist stereotypes:

Years ago, when I was at university in Syracuse, I developed a manner of saying things that made people happy, kept them talking so I didn't have to say much myself, I guess now I'd say that I was building a wall to keep myself safe. In the rooms of wealthy folk, I had perfected my hard southern habit of *Mercy* and *Lord* and *Landsakes*. They were the words I fell back on for another form of silence, the words I've always fallen back on, my reliables, they've been my last resort for I don't know how long. (293; emphasis in original)

Like Jaslyn, Gloria withdraws into herself and builds a wall to protect herself. Moreover, in another typical trauma reaction, she considers silence – even if it is a silence hidden behind empty words – her “last resort”.

### **Struggle with Language and the Inexpressibility of Trauma**

Characters' struggling with language or searching for the right word can be read as a conventional textual mark of the inexpressibility of traumatic experience. McCann makes use of this marker in several instances. With regard to the tightrope walk, for example, the crowd gathered at the feet of the World Trade Center watch the performance, and thus by extension the attacks of 9/11, in “awful” “silence” (McCann, *Let* 3). Moreover, according to Claire, her husband adopts the typical strategy of dealing with trauma by not speaking about it: “Solomon didn't talk about the war. Silence was his way out” (89). While Claire apparently gives in to her pain, the chapter adopting Soderberg's point of view suggests that he hides his grief – crying only in the bathroom at night (263) – because he feels he does not have the right to suffer from the loss of his son: “you soon figure out that your grief isn't half the grief that everyone else has” (253). Repression also plays a role in his behavior since he admits that Joshua is “[n]ot something he liked thinking about, not the loss at least, the terrible loss. It brought too much heartache” (263). However, Soderberg is not the only one failing to express his feelings. The mothers, too, are repeatedly faced with a lack of adequate words to articulate their emotions. The way in which Gloria's narrative circles around the loss of her sons without naming it can be interpreted as a sign of this problem. She hints again at her incapability to speak about the death of her sons when she admits to having produced “fifty or sixty” (315) drafts of a response letter to Marcia's advertisement in which “she explained everything about [her] boys” (315) but in the end sent a letter without any information on them or herself because “[i]t just didn't seem right” (316). Gloria even draws on almost stereotypical psychological terminology in describing the difficulties the group, which after all functions as a kind of talking therapy, experiences when trying to speak of the traumatic loss: “Funny how it was, everyone perched in their own little world with the deep need to talk, each person with their own tale, beginning

in some strange middle point, then trying so hard to tell it all, to have it all make sense, logical and final” (293). In this text passage, the characters are depicted as feeling the need to talk but being unable to achieve a coherent narrative. This classic concept of trauma reappears in McCann’s depiction of the victims of the hurricanes: According to Jaslyn, the people who survived the hurricanes feel a “deep need just to talk” while at the same time having difficulties of opening up (337).<sup>77</sup> The Caruthian trauma discourse suggests that narrativizing the traumatic experience is essential to overcome the traumatic loss (Caruth, “Recapturing” 153; Laub, “Truth” 63; Kaplan 37; Whitehead 140). McCann hints at this concept when, in one stream of consciousness, Claire admits that she has never spoken to anyone about the day she found out about her son’s death but when she finally does, she feels unburdened: “It feels like I have waited my whole life to tell that story” (McCann, *Let* 111).

### Haunting

Before realizing the benefits of speaking about her loss, Claire reflects on the difficulties of dealing with traumatization: “You let it be, it returns. There’s the truth. You let it be, it drags you to the ground. You let it be, it crawls up your walls” (McCann, *Let* 81). In this text passage, Claire questions the possibility of repressing traumatic memory because, according to her, if you “let it be” it returns to depress you. However, she not only suggests that it is necessary to face trauma to overcome it but also refers to trauma’s capacity, advocated by Caruth, to haunt if not worked through properly. In the chapter narrated from her point of view, it becomes clear that Claire speaks from experience since she feels haunted by the war in which her son died and by memories of him. She then uses typical Caruthian terminology to describe how memories of Joshua trigger in her the feeling of being strangled by a phantom:

She feels a little murmur at her ribcage, a swell of air. Joshua. . . .

The necklace with a phantom hand. Sometimes it happens. She gets a little rush of blood to the throat. A clawing at the windpipe. As if someone is squeezing her, a momentary restriction. (75)

In this stream of consciousness of Claire’s, the memories return like a phantom to haunt and agonize her. In yet another text passage, Claire explicitly personifies the Vietnam as a haunting

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<sup>77</sup> Jaslyn’s description of her role as listener (McCann (*Let* 337) is highly reminiscent of yet another classic trauma concept coined by Laub according to which narrating the traumatic experience creates a distance to the events and allows for its partial externalization (“Bearing” 69). For this process to occur, the presence of an emphatic listener is necessary, however (“Bearing” 68).

ghost: “War. The disgusting proximity of it. Its body odor. Its breath on her neck all this time, two years now since pullout, three, two a [sic] half, five million, does it matter? Nothing’s over” (85). Claire refers here to the alleged haunting quality of traumatic memory twice: in the personification of the war which follows her around and in the conclusion that “[n]othing’s over”, underlining that it does not leave her alone even years after the end of US warfare in Vietnam.

### **Disturbed Perception of Time**

In the quoted text passage, Claire displays another sign of traumatization in the Caruthian sense: she thinks that pullout was “two,” “two a [sic] half,” “three” or even “five million” years ago, while in fact it was no more than one and a half years before her wondering about it in August 1974. Her perception of time is thus apparently disturbed. A troubled perception of time becomes also apparent in Claire’s reaction to Marcia’s account of the tightrope performance, which links it to her son’s death and by extension to all of the sons’ deaths in Vietnam. For Claire, it is

like a slam in the chest. So immediate. At all of their coffee mornings, it had always been distant, belonging to another day, the talk, the memory, the recall, the stories, a distant land, but this was now and real . . . (McCann, *Let* 99)

The performance of the funambulist thus brings up unexpectedly the painful memory of the death of her son, like a blow, and breaches the comforting temporal distance by making it immediate. This collapse of the breach between past and present leaves Claire “[d]isoriented” (99) and with the impression that even the clock stopped working properly since it is “moving but not sounding anymore” (99). In classic trauma literature fashion, the traumatic memory hence suddenly and unexpectedly interferes with Claire’s life, a process which classic psychological trauma discourse termed “intrusion” (Bohleber, “Entwicklung” 826) and Caruth called “intrusive images and thoughts” (“Recapturing” 151).

### **Feeling of Fragmentation**

Another recurring metaphor that can be read as suggestive of trauma in the classic understanding is the characters’ feeling that things or people fall apart. Especially in the chapters in which Soderberg, Claire, Gloria, and Jaslyn are the focalizers of the narrative, McCann evokes an atmosphere of personal and societal disruption and change. Especially in these chapters, the author suggests that the feeling of things falling apart is common to

different eras in US history which can be considered traumatic for large parts of US society. Gloria remembers that at the time of the Great Depression “[t]hings were falling apart, but we held together as best we could” (McCann, *Let* 285). Looking at the picture of the tightrope walk, Jaslyn’s use of the expression puts forward the idea that, in contrast to the day of the performance, after 9/11 things fell apart: “A man high in the air while a plane disappears, it seems, into the edge of the building . . . As if the walking man were somehow anticipating what would come later. . . . We wait for the explosion but it never occurs. . . . Things don’t fall apart” (325). The general picture McCann draws of New York in 1974 puts into question Jaslyn’s assumption that things were not falling apart at that time. The recurring imagery of the Bronx on fire and covered in waste, the description of prostitution and police’s arbitrariness, Judge Soderberg’s being disgusted at the downfall of the city reflected in its bankruptcy (254), the shabby cabs (249) and courtrooms (255), the sorts of crimes he has to deal with (256–57), and the legal system governed by quotas (256) all contribute to this impression. Especially Soderberg, who is conscious of being just “a part of the Parts” (256), reveals how New York appears to be dissolving, a city in which “the mayor wheezed and wheedled and lied while the city burned down to the ground, got itself ready for its own little funeral of ashes, crime, crime, crime” (257). “Falling apart” can have three connotations linked to trauma: First, it can be a sign of the destructive impact trauma has on a person’s identity. Claire, for example, struggles to convince herself that, despite the painful memories of her dead son, “I shall not fall apart” (85). This quotation is not accidentally reminiscent of the experience of fragmentation ascribed to trauma victims and, in Caruthian thinking, expressed by fragmented narratives in trauma fiction.<sup>78</sup> Second, it might be a metaphor for the destructive impact trauma can have on a community. In both cases, it symbolizes the loss of certainty and security. Third, “falling apart” includes with “falling” another metaphor connected to trauma as shown above.

#### 5.4. Previous Analyses of *Let the Great World Spin: A Metaphorical 9/11 Novel*

The influence of Caruthian trauma discourse also looms large in the critics’ reception of McCann’s novel. Due to its publication date at the heyday of 9/11 novels and their scholarly

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<sup>78</sup> The feeling of a fragmented self can be connected to the feeling of being disconnected from one’s body, which, according to Hones (99), different characters (Lara, Gloria, the walker) in the novel share. In my opinion, the way in which McCann includes the characters’ impression of being disconnected from their body does not suggest that it is related to trauma, however.

discussion,<sup>79</sup> its invocation of the tightrope walk between the towers of the World Trade Center and McCann's personal involvement with New York and the attacks of September 11, 2001, – his father-in-law managed to leave the towers just in time and relatively unharmed –, *Let the Great World Spin* was readily accepted as “9/11 novel” (T. Adams; Cusatis 183; Hones 5) or “9/11 fiction” (Flannery, “Internationalizing” 294).

Only few critics found that analyses of the novel could not be restricted to its allegorical depiction of September 11, 2001, and considered its special form. Cusatis sums up some of the various labels attributed to the novel:

In addition to being a pastiche of literary predecessors<sup>80</sup>, the novel stitches together the stories from the points of view of eleven characters . . . , causing critics to refer to it alternately as a mosaic, a panorama, a symphony, a tapestry, a polyphonic novel, and a sprawling epic. (175)

These characterizations of the novel should be seen in line with the praise it received for its “democratic” approach to storytelling because of the diverse milieus and characters it depicts (Cusatis 190, Cahill and Flannery 1). Accordingly, Flannery finds *Let the Great World Spin* a social and political novel because it depicts “criminality, destitution, addiction, and class division” (Colum 207). This approach is in Flannery's view the formal tool McCann applies to reach one of his main goals: to elucidate how taking a new look, a different perspective on things creates beauty (216). McCann explains his intentions differently, however: “I wanted it to be a Whitmanesque song of the city, with everything in there—high and low, rich and poor, black, white, and Hispanic. Hungry, exhausted, filthy, vivacious, everything this lovely city is” (Englander and McCann). McCann thus foregrounds that *Let the Great World Spin* is a novel about New York which necessitates the depiction of the ethnic and social diversity it offers.

Although *Let the Great World Spin* is a hybrid text which allows for various labels, still the most common one considers *Let the Great World Spin* a 9/11 novel. Many studies, and also reviews, focus on the alleged function of the tightrope walk to represent the unrepresentable by reading it as a metaphorical representation of 9/11. Cusatis, for instance, states that “*Let*

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<sup>79</sup> For an elaboration on the heyday of 9/11 novels and their analysis see the chapter on *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*.

<sup>80</sup> *Let the Great World Spin* is “a pastiche of literary predecessors” because it refers to the American transcendentalists in its description of the wilderness in which the funambulist practices (Cusatis 189), to James Joyce's *Ulysses* in its one-day narrative structure (Fogarty 115; with regard to other similarities: Mikowski 129), and to F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* in Lara and her husband's wish to live like a 1920s artist couple (cf. Hones), for example.

*the Great World Spin* is an existential novel, an allegorical reconsideration of the fathomless horror that the twin towers came to represent after the 11 September terrorist attack on them” (177). Johnston, too, insists that the novel is an allegory on 9/11 while Flannery first formulates a little more cautiously that McCann’s novel is an “allegory on human suffering, which partially speaks to 11 September” (*Colum* 205) but in a later article finds the novel to be in accord with Richard Gray’s explicitly Caruthian assessment that a trauma like 9/11 cannot be narrated directly (“Internationalizing” 295), that it is only “admissible through figuration” (“Internationalizing” 295). These readings can thus be ascribed to the Caruthian ideas that devastating traumatic experiences are incomprehensible and can only be represented metaphorically.

Hones’ analysis of McCann’s novel also follows Caruth’s theory when she states, for example, that

between the 1974 chapters and the 2006 chapter, McCann leaves a structurally vital narrative gap, an empty space where readers might well expect to find the events of 9/11. McCann has in this way created a gap in the novel where 9/11 ‘ought to be,’ . . . That day, inevitably, haunts the narrative (5).

The detection of a telling gap suggests the type of analysis rightly criticized by Pederson. A gap of thirty-two years is here equated with and thus read as referring to one “day”. Furthermore, in classic Caruthian trauma language that day supposedly “haunts the narrative”, although the “gap,” which refers to it, is situated in the last chapter close to the end of the novel, and although, if anything, the haunting quality can be attributed to events or experience rather than to a day. Fogarty’s reading follows Hones’ when she states that *Let the Great World Spin*,

[w]hile set in New York on 7 August 1974, . . . loops backwards in time to Dublin in the late 1950s . . . and then moves forward to 2006 tracking several of its migrant figures. In so doing, it bypasses its primary but tacit subject, the attack on the Twin Towers on 11 September 2001. Yet, paradoxically, in seemingly side-stepping this topic, it also addresses it. (119)

In this interpretation, not mentioning September 11, 2001, or skipping its direct depiction, is considered proof for its key significance and indirect way of dealing with it. In a similar manner, Stein follows Hones’ theory of the telling gap in his conclusion that *Let the Great World Spin* deals with 9/11 in an intricate way by not dealing at all with 9/11.

Whereas McCann offers a variety of possible angles of interpretation with regard to *Let the Great World Spin*, and despite the intertextual references and other allusions to 9/11 on the intratextual level analyzed above, one should note that he repeatedly refused the 9/11

label, for example in his interviews with Englander and Lennon, pointing to the many other themes treated by the novel. However, in the interview with Johnston, he repeatedly claims that the novel is “about an act of recovery”, “about healing” and about how “[w]e learn and then move on,” explicitly referring to recovery and overcoming grief thereby suggesting an interpretation of *Let the Great World Spin* as trauma novel. He also concedes that “there’s hardly a line in the novel about 9/11, but it’s everywhere if the reader wants it to be” (Johnston).

In the next chapter, I will propose a reading of McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin* through the analytical perspective of network theory – an approach that can also be found in secondary literature on the novel. In a second step, I will extend the existing network-based analyses of the novel by combining network theory with trauma theory to analyze the connections between traumas that the novel suggests.

## 5.5. Trauma and Network in *Let the Great World Spin*

A man high in the air while a plane disappears, it seems, into the edge of the building. One small scrap of history meeting a larger one. As if the walking man where somehow anticipating what would come later. The intrusion of time and history. The collision point of stories. (McCann, *Let* 325)

### 5.5.1. *Let the Great World Spin* as Network Narrative

Another strand of analyses of *Let the Great World Spin*, which can often be found in the same study or by the same scholar labeling the text a “9/11 novel”, focuses on the web-like structure of the narrative and on the recurring themes of creating connections and being connected. Flannery, for example, states that “*Let the Great World Spin* is a novel of connections” (Colum 222), an analysis supported by McCann’s comment that rather than being a 9/11 novel, it could be about “how we are all intimately connected” (Englander and McCann). Cusatis, too, discloses in his analysis different connecting elements, like fear (178), for example, and concludes that “*Let the Great World Spin* is founded on the idea of connectedness” (175). McCann’s novel certainly provokes these interpretations since not only collective historical traumas but also connections and networks appear in the novel in diverse forms. On the linguistic level, it is noteworthy that “wires,” “tubes” and “pipes,” and thus connecting elements of all sorts, appear again and again throughout the novel. Not only the hackers work among “wires” but “wires” can also be found next to the “pipes” in the subway tunnels, which

are also “tubes” (McCann, *Let* 168). McCann hence suggests by his wording an underlying structure of connections, an idea also articulated by the Kid, one of his characters, who finds that “[i]t’s about being connected” (197).

On the story-level, McCann refers above all to communication networks, like the mail service, for example. It is through this network that Claire, Gloria, and the three other mothers meet since they all sent letters in response to Marcia’s newspaper ad. Claire refers to the function of the mail system for the creation of their group after posting her reply: she “[t]hought of her letter winding its way through the postal system, eventually to another like her” (91). In the chapter on Sam and his three colleagues, the characters make ample use of two further communication networks: they learn about the wire walker’s performance because they “got the message on the ARPANET”, a predecessor of the Internet,<sup>81</sup> of “some guy walking the wires high above New York” (177), and they use their computers for blue boxing – also known as ‘phreaking’, which means placing free phone calls in the telephone network – when they are bored (177). Apparently, it is also through blue boxing that they call several pay phones close to the World Trade Center in New York and are finally able to connect to a man (178), and later a woman (188), watching the tightrope walker. Sam and his colleagues thus move effortlessly in the computer and telecommunication networks which in the mid-1970s were not accessible to the wider public. The description of their jobs in a Pentagon program for the Vietnam War and the working conditions link Sam and his colleagues to Claire’s son Joshua, who also considers himself a “hacker” (87), works in a basement within “the web of wires” (87) for the US-military in Vietnam, and exploits the communication networks for making free phone calls (101). This last skill Tillie shares with the hackers. She tells the reader that she used to call Jazzlyn or even herself from the pay phone because she had learned from the Vietnam Vets “who came back from ‘Nam all messed up in the head” (215) how to call without paying.

It is probably because of Joshua’s work within different webs that with the electricity network another network assumes a special role in *Let the Great World Spin*. It offers comfort to Claire when her son is still alive:

It was as if she could travel through the electricity to see him. She could look at any electronic thing – television, radio, Solomon’s shaver – and could find herself there,

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<sup>81</sup> Sam’s boss predicts that someday in the future even the just emerging ARPANET will be outdated and people will communicate via microchips implanted in their heads, a vision Sam finds attractive since it would make phone lines redundant (187).

journeying along the raw voltage. Most of all it was the fridge. She could wake in the middle of the night and wander through the apartment into the kitchen and lean against the freezer. . . . she could gaze past the wires, the cathodes, the transistors, the hand-set switches, through the ether, and she could see him, all of a sudden she was in the very same room, right beside him . . . (86–87)

In this text passage, McCann shows how the electricity network allows Claire to connect to her son in Vietnam – or, at least, she can imagine a connection through the devices plugged into the power network.

A whole other type of network which is of significance in *Let the Great World Spin* is the city of New York. Many characters employ the city's subway system, the often quoted prototypical transportation network, to travel to work, to meet other characters, and even to tend to their hobbies, as in Fernando's case who rides the subway to take pictures of graffiti tags (167). Gloria realizes the network quality of New York not while riding the subway, however, but while walking home from Claire's apartment: "It had never occurred to me before but everything in New York is built upon another thing, nothing is entirely by itself, each thing as strange as the last, and connected" (306). In a similar vein, for Hones, the New York of *Let the Great World Spin* is "a city of layers and links, connections and interactions, things somehow holding together against the odds" (59). New York's network structure hence exceeds the mere underground network; it is made up of elements of completely different natures, which only receive meaning through their connectedness. Moreover, according to Hones, "the 'specificity' of this New York City as a place is not something inherent or stable but rather something that emerges out of intersections and meetings, multiple 'stories-so-far'" (56). For her, as for Gloria, the city emerges out of connections.

In the novel, New York is not only presented as made of a network structure but also as an important hub in a global network of connections. Referring to the many different settings of the plotlines and the diverse origins of the novel's characters, such as Ireland, Guatemala, Vietnam, Palo Alto, and New Orleans, Flannery reads New York City as "the localized global space and . . . the endpoint of all these vectors of travel and displacement" (*Colum* 209). The mobility of the characters, the topics of migration and finding home, as well as the representation of New York City as a global city, which assembles people from different origins on the local level, position the novel firmly as a narrative of globalization. Fogarty draws a line from these topics to network theory:

The environments McCann describes are indelibly coloured by the politics of migration and transnationalism. They are recurrently seen as part of a network of places and temporal

sites and a confluence of stories. . . . Not alone are the stories of his characters intermeshed and multi-perspectival but they also form part of patterns that extend beyond the local and the particular and create further webs of connection on a transnational and global plane. (108)

I agree with Fogarty's interpretation and her emphasis on webs of transnational connections. Of the many characters populating *Let the Great World Spin*, hardly any were born in New York. Whereas Claire ("grew up in Florida", 77), Gloria ("grew up in southern Missouri", 285), Lara ("Midwestern girl", 124), and Tillie (apparently from "Cleveland", 215), for example, moved to New York from other parts of the United States, other characters like Adelita, the Corrigan brothers, and some of the elderly people Corrigan takes care of are marked by experiences of transnational migration.

McCann also employs network strategies for the development of the plot of *Let the Great World Spin*. A number of critics have asserted this approach without going into a deeper analysis of the motives for this special narrative structure. Mahler, for example, employs a typical network theory catch-phrase when he finds that the plot expands in circles "six-degrees-of-separation-style"<sup>82</sup>. There are several examples in the novel to which Mahler might refer, like Lara's call on the imprisoned Tillie. At first glance, the Black prostitute and the white artist have nothing in common but because of Lara's involvement in the car accident in which Tillie's daughter is killed and her bad conscience, she first searches the hospitals for Jazzlyn and Corrigan, is then given Corrigan's belongings, meets Ciaran, is invited to Jazzlyn's funeral and visits Tillie, who does not remember meeting her, in prison (McCann, *Let* 220). Mahler goes on to compare *Let the Great World Spin* to the film *Crash*, an often-cited example of network films<sup>83</sup> because of its narrative structure and the driving force of the car accident in which Corrigan and Jazzlyn die. As in *Crash*, and in many other network narratives, the car accident plays a significant role in the development of the plot and above all in establishing links between disparate characters' plotlines, as I have shown concerning Lara and Tillie but which also holds true for the special connection between Jaslyn and Claire, for instance. Without the fatal

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<sup>82</sup> This effect is often cited in network theory because it illustrates the notion that in a network any two unrelated points are usually "connected by short chains of links" (Caldarelli and Catanzaro 49). The term was first used by Stanley Milgram who, in a famous 1967 experiment, showed that letters sent to a random selection of people would reach their intended recipients, even though their address was not given, by being forwarded to friends and acquaintances six times on average (Caldarelli and Catanzaro 47–48).

<sup>83</sup> Narine and Reichardt refer to this film, for example.

accident, Gloria would never have adopted Jaslyn and her sister, and, consequently, the daughters of a Black prostitute would never have gotten acquainted with the white Park Avenue resident Claire, who eventually even considers them her nieces (335). Mahler is not the only critic who uses the car accident to explain the subtle connections between plotlines and characters without referring to network theory explicitly. In a similar vein, T. Adams finds the novel to “[spool] outward from this sudden and brutal rupture in unexpected ways”, and Lennon states that “[t]he life of every character somehow dovetails with other characters, and in particular, radiates from a single moment of tragedy and trauma” (“Country” 99), namely the car accident. The network-like structure of the novel’s narrative becomes also apparent with regard to some of its characters. Corrigan, for example, can be considered a hub in *Let the Great World Spin*’s network narrative from which links pan out and through which the stories of different characters become connected. Corrigan is “‘at the core’ of things”, as Cusatis puts it (185), because of his relations to many of the characters, namely Ciaran, the senior citizens, Adelita, and “the cast-offs of New York – the whores, the hustlers, the hopeless – all of those who were hanging on to him like he was some bright hallelujah in the shitbox of what the world really was” (McCann, *Let* 15); because of the way he is perceived by them as being “at the origin of things” (67); and because of his name, which derives from the Latin word for ‘heart’, meaning ‘*cor*’. Moreover, Corrigan is part of one vast actor-network, his religious order, which sends its monks to different parts of Europe, the United States, and “the Third World” (22). Hones argues that also judge Soderberg is “one of the narrative’s many network hubs” (81) because he coexists and interrelates with six of the novel’s main characters (80). The same could be said about Lara, for instance, who “interrelates” with Ciaran, Tillie, Jaslyn, Blaine, Corrigan, and Jazzlyn. McCann thus spins his story network not only around events but also around characters which function as nodes and are inserted in network relations.

Although *Let the Great World Spin* “no longer *performs* the rhizomatic complexity found in systems such as the internet, but rather comments on the idea of the network” (Schober 393; emphasis in original), network structures play a significant role on the levels of content and plot. Consequently, several scholars have considered network theory in their study of McCann’s novel. Hones uses McCann’s novel as a case study for exploring space in contemporary fiction by means of literary geography. In a chapter dealing with distance, she brings up network theory because, in her view, conventional two-dimensional literary maps cannot do justice to the way in which “collisions, connections, separations, and networks

function structurally in the novel” (86). Yet, Hones does not offer an extensive network theory based analysis of the whole novel. Schober’s article, by contrast, focuses explicitly on McCann’s use of networks to convey a sense of unity and reconciliation after the attacks of September 11, 2001. Connections and being connected have thus been carved out as major themes in *Let the Great World Spin*, and network theory has been applied more or less consistently to analyze it. Using network terminology, McCann suggested this approach in an interview stating that

the book follows the intricate lives of a number of different people who live on the ground, or, rather, people who walk the ground’s tightrope. They accidentally dovetail in and out of each other’s lives on this one day . . . The lives braid in and out of each other. It’s a collision, really, a web in this big sprawling complex web that we call New York. (McCann, Q)

*Let the Great World Spin* hence lends itself to a network theory based analysis because of its themes, structure and presentation. However, no study considers the significance of networks in the novel with regard to the traumas dealt with. This gap might be due to the fact that, at first sight, the concept of trauma does not have much in common with what is usually referred to as “network theory”. At a second glance, however, some striking overlaps become apparent which suggest that a combined application of the concepts, which are both transdisciplinary in their development and their use,<sup>84</sup> can generate fruitful results, especially regarding the analysis of the representational strategies applied to relate several collective historical novels to each other.

### 5.5.2. Theoretical Overlaps between Network and Trauma Concepts

Theories of networks are as manifold and as diverse as the disciplines from which they have evolved, like mathematics, sociology, neuroscience, and computer sciences, for instance (Riou et al. 7; Galloway). This paper relies on an understanding of networks as complex webs of connections and interactions between more than two elements in which the connections<sup>85</sup> are as significant and as much carrier of agency as the elements they link. Agency, as understood by network theory, is “always presented in an account as doing something, that is, making some difference to a state of affairs, transforming some As into Bs through trials with

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<sup>84</sup> This has been shown with regard to network theory by Riou et al., for example, and by Luckhurst (“Traumaculture”) with regard to trauma.

<sup>85</sup> The links or connections are also known as “edges” in network theory.

Cs" (Latour, *Reassembling* 52–53). Networks are indifferent to their content and thus neither positive nor negative (Böhme 33). Material as well as symbolic objects can create networks (Böhme 17). Despite functioning autonomously, a network can form part of another one (Böhme 20). Of special interest for this paper are elements which are connected to a high number of others and thus function as hubs<sup>86</sup> (Caldarelli and Catanzaro 55). According to Caldarelli and Catanzaro, the existence of hubs marks a network as heterogeneous in contrast to homogeneous networks in which "all nodes have more or less the same degree" (59).<sup>87</sup> Further important characteristics of the network include "decentralization, connectivity and relationality, flexibility, and non-linear shape" (Schober 392–93); its connections are marked by multidirectionality, changeability and fluidity. Since they are usually invisible, networks have to be represented or mapped to become visible (Böhme 26). Moreover, 'network' is at the same time object of and tool for the "study of complex, emergent, and self-organized systems" (Caldarelli and Catanzaro 6).<sup>88</sup>

This list of characteristics hints already at the most significant commonalities between the concepts of trauma and network<sup>89</sup>: First, both concepts are inherently linked to globalization. The connection between networks and globalization has become almost common knowledge and the analysis of one seldom manages without the other. Ulfried Reichardt summarizes: "Networks can be found on both sides of the equation—a globalized world is constituted by networks beyond national borders, yet can also best be conceived of by way of the model of the network. Therefore, it is no accident that modern technological networks and globalization historically co-evolve(d)" (23). Trauma, in contrast, is, on the one hand, cited as one consequence of globalization processes. Besides the often quoted economic and ecological impacts of globalization which have changed and/or destroyed the basis of existence of whole communities and driven people into precarious working and living conditions – consequently causing new waves of migration –, Sztompka gives another explanation for the occurrence of cultural traumas in processes of globalization. He ascribes

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<sup>86</sup> 'Hubs' are also known as 'knots' or 'nodes', the terms are thus used as synonyms in the following.

<sup>87</sup> For an overview of the different shapes networks can assume see Galloway, for example.

<sup>88</sup> This aspect is discussed in length by Latour (*Reassembling* 131).

<sup>89</sup> I discuss here only those commonalities relevant for the argument of this paper, but there are more, like, for example, the roots of both concepts in modernity, as argue Baumann and Beck with regard to network theory and Forter and Kaplan with regard to trauma.

them to “the intensifying *spatial mobility* of people, who as emigrants and refugees, but also as business travelers and tourists, find themselves in the milieu of the alien culture” (162-3; emphasis in original). On the other hand, in analyses of media culture, for instance, trauma figures as one example of how western concepts and discourses spread due to globalized media coverage of events, such as 9/11 or the Holocaust (e.g. Levy and Sznajder).

Second, the concepts of trauma and networks are linked by the prominent role of “the event”. Ganteau and Onega Jaén refer to Andrew Gibson’s definition of the event as “the chance occurrence of something that had no existence beforehand, could not be predicted or foreseen and had no prior name” (Gibson 3). Moreover, unlike accidents or disasters, an event has unpredictable and long-lasting consequences (Ganteau and Onega Jaén 8). Ganteau and Onega Jaén, like many other traditional trauma theorists, find that this definition of the event holds true for those traumatic events dealt with in trauma literature (9).<sup>90</sup> Traumatization is usually caused by an event that fits the above cited definition since it overwhelms the subject because of its unexpected and/or unforeseeable nature and since the often long-lasting psychological and physical symptoms it triggers are unpredictable. The transfer of the quoted definition of “the event” to networks is less straightforward since in network theory it is the *accident*, as a contingent node (Bordwell 207), which is usually considered the trigger of unforeseeable consequences for the connections and nodes inside the network. The “accident”, as defined in network theory thus shares a number of characteristics with “the event” of trauma theory since both trigger unforeseeable and long-lasting changes in the (mental) tissue.<sup>91</sup> These changes take the form of severed and/or new connections in both concepts (Bordwell; Varvin).

Third, trauma and networks both function non-linearly and alter perceptions of time. In his often cited *Rise of the Network Society*, Manuel Castells states that “linear, irreversible,

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<sup>90</sup> It is not surprising that Ganteau and Onega Jaén quote Gibson’s definition of the event since he makes ample use of trauma terminology in his insistence on the unforeseeable nature, the namelessness, the sudden, shattering emergence of the event and its being connected to the void: “By the event, I mean the random occurrence of the new in Being. The event is the occasion of the transformation of forms, the transformation of the world. It is an aleatory fragment, the chance occurrence of something that had no existence beforehand, could not be predicted or foreseen and had no prior name” (Gibson 3), “firstly, the event properly speaking appears as a rupture or break with an established order (aesthetic, political, psychic, etc.)”, “[t]he second and related feature is that the event is or involves an encounter with or a manifestation of the void in all its mundanity” (Gibson 5).

<sup>91</sup> Also some trauma theorists, like Hartman (“On”), for instance, use the term “accident” rather than “event”.

measurable, predictable time is being shattered in the network society” (463) which is reflected in the following definition of his concept of “timeless time”:

timeless time . . . occurs when the characteristics of a given context, namely, the informational paradigm and the network society, induce systemic perturbation in the sequential order of phenomena performed in that context. This perturbation may take the form of compressing the occurrence of the phenomena, aiming at instantaneity, or else by introducing random discontinuity in the sequence. Elimination of sequencing creates undifferentiated time, which is tantamount to eternity. (494; emphasis in original)

In a society marked by networks,<sup>92</sup> such as technological, logistic, and political networks, the traditional sequence of time may thus appear altered in different ways, for example as reversed, simultaneous or unreliable. Similarly, in trauma, the unexpected and unforeseeable intrusion of the traumatic past into the present, by way of nightmares and flashbacks, for example, as well as certain symptoms, such as repetition compulsion or the experience of time as frozen, can lead to a confusion of past and present or to their being experienced as simultaneous. As Leys puts it, “the experience of the trauma, fixed or frozen in time, refuses to be represented as past, but is perpetually re-experienced in a painful, dissociated, traumatic present” (2).<sup>93</sup> To illustrate this special feature of trauma, Jenny Edkins distinguishes between “narrativised time, time which has beginning and ends” (40) and “trauma time,” which alters the linearity of the Newtonian time concept, which assumes “a succession of past, present and future” (34).

Fourth, both concepts assume that their objects are not fixed but in constant change since they are shaped by often ephemeral connections and multidirectional relations. With regard to traumatic memories this has been shown by Rothberg, for example, who proposed the above cited theory based on the assumption that (traumatic) memories are created through links between the memories of different groups, that is, memories are the result of constant transhistorical and transcultural processes of negotiation, referencing and borrowing, which always run in several directions between at least two bodies of memories

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<sup>92</sup> Castells speaks of the “network society” since “as an historical trend, dominant functions and processes in the Information Age are increasingly organized around networks. Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power, and culture. While the networking form of social organization has existed in other times and spaces, the new information technology paradigm provides the material basis for its pervasive expansion throughout the entire social structure” (500).

<sup>93</sup> Allan Young even calls PTSD “a disease of time” (7) because of the aforementioned symptoms.

(*Multidirectional* 35). In a different approach to the meaning of links, Luckhurst insists on the fact that trauma might produce unexpected connections since

[t]rauma is a piercing breach of a border that puts inside and outside into a strange communication. Trauma violently opens passageways between systems that were once discrete, making unforeseen connections that distress or confound. (*Trauma* 3)

Links produced by trauma and/or traumatic memory are thus not fixed but fluid.<sup>94</sup> With regard to the links forming networks, Schober writes: “these connections are not stable but dynamic. In a fluctuating manner, they emerge and disappear again, leaving behind ephemeral traces” (395-6). Typical networks connections, and consequently the networks built from them, are thus also not fixed but “highly dynamic” (Castells 501), which allows for a constant change of shape.<sup>95</sup>

The overlaps between the characteristics of trauma and networks as put forward by the respective theories find expression in the narrative forms usually chosen and deemed suitable to represent the two phenomena.<sup>96</sup> They hence become even more apparent if one takes into consideration contemporary narratological theories. Profound studies of the representational mode which has become known as “network narrative” or “network narration” have been scarce up to now. In his study *Poetics of Cinema* (2008), David Bordwell was one of the first scholars to list the main characteristics and functions of network narratives. Even though his focus is on film, he argues that “[t]he network principle has a proud place in Western fiction and drama” (194) since the 19<sup>th</sup> century citing, for example, Charles Dickens and Thomas Mann, and insisting that it plays an important role in “all domains of popular culture” (195) today. The characteristics of network narratives<sup>97</sup> outlined by Bordwell can thus be considered applicable to network narratives in other media as well. When they are compared with characteristics typically attributed to trauma narratives, several overlaps become apparent. For the

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<sup>94</sup> One might add here that some of trauma’s effects can be considered consequences of the breaking of links, like, for example, the withdrawal of the victim to isolation as a consequence of strong ties to fellow men being severed.

<sup>95</sup> Latour (*Reassembling* 132), Caldarelli and Catanzaro (108), and Böhme (23) make similar arguments.

<sup>96</sup> Parts of the remainder of this chapter have been published in my article “Analyzing the Network of Traumas in Colum McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin*” (Koschorreck).

<sup>97</sup> Different definitions of the term ‘network narrative’ exist. In David Ciccoricco’s understanding, for example, “[n]etwork fiction makes use of hypertext technology in order to create emergent and recombinatory narratives” (4). In the following, I use the term in Bordwell’s sense.

subsequent analysis of *Let the Great World Spin*, the following similarities are particularly relevant:

First, according to classic literary trauma theory, trauma narratives not only deal with the trauma of their protagonists on the story-level, but use techniques which “[mimic] its forms and symptoms” (Whitehead 3; Vickroy 138).<sup>98</sup> Since in texts “[n]etworking can be a topic or a mode of organization and composition” (Reichardt et al., “Introduction” 12), both trauma and network narratives not only deal with their subjects metaphorically but also try to reproduce their structure. For example, in trauma narratives, repetitions at the level of language, imagery, or plot typically function as textual traces of the repetition compulsion or the repetitive intrusion of memories attributed to trauma. According to Gibbs, “[t]raumatic memories are . . . typically built around what Genette terms repeating narrative, where a single last episode is narrated . . . numerous times” (54). Network narratives also often repeat the description of one event, typically a car accident<sup>99</sup>, for example, from the point of view of different protagonists (Bordwell 204), thereby reflecting the event’s position as narrative knot in a web of stories. Furthermore, both types of narrative often include meaningful gaps (Bordwell 200; Gibbs 75). In trauma narratives they symbolize the gap to be found where the memory of the traumatic event should be. For their inclusion in network narratives there are two explanations: Bordwell considers them a means to incite the viewer/reader to “build inferences” (200); in my view, they symbolize what Böhme considers our near speechlessness in the face of the in-between of the network, namely that which does not consist of lines and nodes (22). According to Böhme, and in an interesting parallel to trauma, this in-between is quasi identical with the incommensurable and the inexpressible (22). Consequently, one can argue that both trauma and network narratives repeat events which constitute a centerpiece of the narrative and make use of meaningful gaps.

Second, setting different plotlines in parallel or juxtaposition is accepted as a typical technique of network narratives. Bordwell illustrates this feature of network narratives with regard to the protagonists since their “projects are largely decoupled from one another, or only contingently linked” (192), in contrast to other “multiple-protagonist narratives” in which all

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<sup>98</sup> Some scholars, like Caruth and LaCapra, even attribute to trauma narratives the capacity to “cause suffering approximating that of the victims” (Rothe 161) – an idea rightly criticized by Rothe, Gibbs, Luckhurst and others.

<sup>99</sup> According to Bordwell, “[t]raffic accidents are just the most extreme instance of dramatic but contingent nodes” (207).

protagonists “are defined by their roles in the overriding project” (192). As I have shown, novels which deal with several historical traumas often also make use of juxtaposed plotlines, even though this phenomenon has not found entry into the list of characteristics of trauma narratives. Moreover, in network as in trauma narratives, the different plotlines are not completely “decoupled” but connected through hidden or only gradually recognizable links, such as recurring objects (Bordwell 202) or accidental encounters (Bordwell 204). *Great House*, for example, makes use of both of these strategies to link the apparently unconnected. The function of the narrative technique of presenting apparently independent plotlines is to entice the reader/viewer to notice similarities and differences between characters and events as Bordwell puts it concerning network narratives (211).

The third similarity is tightly interwoven with the second since in both types of narrative a dispersed or fragmented narrative voice and alternating points of view correlate with the movement between plotlines. Bordwell states that the “technique of crosscutting among strangers . . . can make their eventual encounters seem less coincidental” (207) thereby evoking the underlying network. This narrative technique is thus fundamental with regard to some of the main functions of network narratives, since, according to Bordwell, “[t]he narration must *reveal* connections, *anticipate* connections, and *conceal* connections” (207; emphasis in original). With regard to trauma fiction, Whitehead analyzes as follows: “The narrative voice is dispersed or fragmented so that each of the protagonists takes up the story, adding to it his or her individual perspective” (88). In trauma narratives, the fragmented voice is thus also used to link characters to a common storyline or event. While these narrative devices similarly establish connections between plotlines in trauma novels and network narratives, I would argue that they also share the function of mimicking experiences of fragmentation and isolation often associated with the network society as well as trauma. Magali C. Michael, for example, considers fragmentation in 9/11 novels “a means of exhibiting the difficulties of ascertaining what actually happened given the chaotic situation” (6).

Fourth, both network and trauma narratives represent on the textual level the unusual perception of time attributed to the underlying concepts. Almost all analyses of trauma narratives deal with their special chronology: Gibbs speaks in this context of “non-linear chronologies” (27). Whitehead’s conclusion that in trauma fiction “temporality and chronology collapse” (3) as well as the “[n]arrative anachrony” found by Luckhurst (*Trauma* 105) are both interpreted “as a symptom of buried trauma” (*Trauma* 105). Although time concepts in

network narratives have hardly been studied so far, Schober's analysis of *Let the Great World Spin* suggests that in this novel the network concept is also used to evoke the possibility of "conflating past and present" (339).<sup>100</sup>

### 5.5.3. Approaches Drawing on Network and Trauma Concepts

Given the many commonalities between trauma and network, the question arises as to why the two concepts have never been used supplementary in scientific research. Despite the lack of consistent studies, there exist, however, some approaches which draw from both theories to explain other or related phenomena. Like the two concepts concerned, these approaches derive from various different disciplines.

With regard to psychic trauma, only recently psychometricians have developed a "network model of psychopathology" (McNally 96) which is based on the idea that "a mental disorder constitutes a causal system of dynamically interacting, possibly self-reinforcing, symptoms" (McNally 96). Among the mental disorders that are in this sense constituted by "the dynamic, causal interactions among symptoms" (McNally 96) are depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder, for example. PTSD as a reaction to trauma can thus be analyzed and treated by conceiving of the symptoms as nodes in a network which interrelate and activate each other. This relatively new approach gained momentum in reaction to the debates surrounding the question "whether disorders should be conceptualized categorically or dimensionally" (McNally 95) caused by the publication of the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) in 2013, and has caused some discussion with regard to its medical benefits. Even though this approach points to structural similarities between trauma and network, it has apparently not been noticed outside of the psychological field and seems not to be relevant for analyses of representations of either of the two concepts so far.

Literary scholar Luckhurst was probably the first to bring together network thinking and trauma in an attempt to grasp the many facets and the specialness of the concept of trauma. In 2010, he applied network theory when he spoke of "the trauma knot" ("Trauma"), using the network term "knot" as a metaphor for the position of the concept of trauma in a web of

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<sup>100</sup> Other similarities between trauma and network narratives, that are not relevant for this study, include, for example, a "delayed" (Bordwell 199) or "belated" (Luckhurst, *Trauma* 91–92) exposition.

discourses from different disciplines. Drawing on Latour's definition of any scientific concept as "a very tight knot at the center of a net" (Latour, *Pandora* 106), Luckhurst gave an explanation of his concept of trauma as knot, which aimed at showing why trauma is often so hard to grasp:

In this model, trauma is a nodal point, a switching centre that is at once an over-determined scientific concept, developed from physiology, neurology and psychiatry, and economic and legal question of causation and responsibility, an historic emanation from industrial modernity and risk society, and a site of political advocacy for heterogeneous alliances of victims and advocates, experts and amateurs. This explains the difficulty in unpicking the full meanings impacted in the term and the unpredictable routes through which it has been disseminated in contemporary Western culture. ("Trauma" 203)

Having stated that the concept of trauma should be considered a knot in a web of different discourses which all influence its meanings and applications, Luckhurst did not probe further, however. He did not consider structural similarities between psychological/cultural trauma and networks as defined by network theory. He also did not study how network theory could be of use in the analysis of trauma and especially of representations of trauma.

Another concept which combines network and trauma concepts tentatively was developed by Steve J. Stern in his study of Chilean memory practices during and after Pinochet's dictatorship. In his trilogy, published between 2004 and 2010, Stern uses the term "memory knot," which he explains as follows: "Expressed theoretically: memory knots are sites of society, place, and time so bothersome, insistent, or conflictive that they move human beings, at least temporarily, beyond the *homo habitus* postulated by anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu. Expressed colloquially: memory knots are sites where the social body screams" (Stern, *Remembering* 121). In this quote, Stern uses several expressions which imply that the memories he alludes to are indeed traumatic: "bothersome" as well as "insistent" can be read as alluding to the haunting quality often attributed to trauma. The "screams" of the "social body" further imply traumatic experience by evoking bodily pain and wounds. Stern's explanation of the bodily side of his metaphor further underlines this point:

The idea of a memory knot is a metaphor inspired by the human body. Consider a knot in the stomach when one is nervous, a lump in the throat when one is moved, and nerve-and-muscle mass that spasms and cries out for relief. Such bodily events break the 'normal' flow of everyday life and habit . . .

Memory knots on the social body also interrupt the normal flow of 'unthinking' reflexes and habits. They force charged issues of memory and forgetfulness into a public domain. They make claims or cause problems that heighten attention and consciousness, thereby unsettling reflexive everyday habits and euphemisms that foster numbing. (Stern, *Remembering* 120)

In this quote, Stern emphasizes the unsettling and disrupting quality of the memories he deals with in his study. Moreover, memory knots are characterized by the unexpected reappearance of repressed memories which demand attention in the public sphere. Also the mix of bodily and psychic reactions brings to mind the original meaning of the term “trauma”, namely wound, its application for mental as well as bodily injuries, and the inseparability of physical and psychological aspects in various accepted definitions of trauma (Varvin 164; Luckhurst, “Trauma” 192; Mehnert 44). Stern’s main example in this context is torture,<sup>101</sup> a textbook example of traumatizing experiences since it impresses itself upon body and psyche.<sup>102</sup> Only near the end of his remarks on memory knots, he draws an explicit line to trauma:

Memory knots on the social body organize and demand cultural attention to a charged historical trauma or turning point – an experience profoundly important to at least one or two still living generations, and in some way recognized as decisive by those who have followed them (*Remembering* 130).

Stern introduces the concept of memory knots in order to “trace the making of influential memory frameworks” (*Reckoning* 10). While it has become clear that the memories which are knotted are mostly traumatic, the concept is linked to network theory by use of the word “knot” and its implicated function as point of heightened (mnemonic) activity in which a number of different memories are connected. Stern explains that those “specific social groups, networks, and leaders who are sufficiently motivated to organize and insist on memory constitute troublesome ‘knots’ on the social body” (*Remembering* 120). Hence, Stern, too, is not interested in analyzing the similarities or fruitful overlaps between network and trauma theory and especially not with regard to representations of trauma.

The notion of ‘memory knots’ appears also in some of Rothberg’s theoretical and methodological considerations, especially in his 2010 introduction to *Noeuds de mémoire: Multidirectional Memory in Postwar French and Francophone Culture*. Rothberg does not refer to Stern, however, and he postulates a concept which he calls, with reference to Pierre Nora’s *lieux de mémoire*, “noeuds de mémoire”. His – apparently deliberately vague – attempts at

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<sup>101</sup> “Torture houses” also figure as example of geographical sites of memory knots (Stern, *Remembering* 123).

<sup>102</sup> The psychic consequences typical of torture, which Edward Peters (*Folter*) lists, overlap for the most part with the symptoms typically attributed to PTSD, such as depression, nightmares, insomnia, restlessness, disturbed ability to communicate, and disturbed social relations (222-3), for example.

defining *noeuds de mémoire* exemplify that some approaches use network and trauma theory to illustrate other concepts:

A project oriented around *noeuds de mémoire* . . . makes no assumptions about the content of communities or their memories. Rather, it suggests that ‘knotted’ in all places and [sic] acts of memory are rhizomatic networks of temporality and cultural reference that exceed attempts at territorialization (whether at the local or national level) and identitarian reduction. (Rothberg, “Introduction” 7)

*Noeuds de mémoire* as we conceive them here are not static conglomerations of heterogeneous elements. As James Young and others have taught us, sites of memory do not remember by themselves – they require the active agency of individuals and publics. (“Introduction” 8)

In the two quotes, speaking of “agency” and the openness of the network, for example, Rothberg relies heavily on network terminology to illustrate his point of memories being interlaced. Similarly, “rhizomatic” refers to Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s concept of the rhizome, which emphasizes, much like network theory, the interconnectedness of non-hierarchical elements, the constant change and renewal of the connections as well as the unpredictability of the outcome of these connections. Rothberg’s approach resembles Stern’s in that it is above all concerned with the workings of memory in a more general sense, while conceding that trauma always plays an important role in analyses of memory: “Neither sites nor knots of memory are necessarily limited to the evocation of trauma, yet as LaCapra suggests in his response to Nora, traumatic histories are often at stake in modern modes of remembrance, even if those modes sometimes disavow rupture” (“Introduction” 210). In a more recent article, Rothberg partly follows Luckhurst’s thesis when he states that “the different sites of trauma – as well as the different sites of trauma theory – are linked in networks of causality, feedback, and mediation that require a more sophisticated tracing of knots and assemblages of violence than early work on trauma provided” (“Preface” 17).<sup>103</sup> Even if the approach stipulated in this quote exceeds Luckhurst’s in that it does not only consider trauma *theory* as part of a network but also the *site* of trauma itself, it does not, however, come closer to an analytical application of network theory in trauma studies or *vice versa* than the aforementioned approaches. Hence, all three approaches by Luckhurst, Stern, and Rothberg do not consider how network theory could be of use in the analysis of trauma and especially of representations of trauma.

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<sup>103</sup> Other scholars who adopted Luckhurst’s idea include Buelens et al.; Rothe.

Closest to a practical application of network thinking on representations of trauma come Neil Narine's studies of what he calls "Global Network Films". These films, like *Crash* or *Babel*, are network narratives in Narine's understanding because their "narrative centrally or allegorically dramatizes a social network" (214), and the protagonist "investigates and unearths a complex set of global relations in which s/he is implicated" (214). Even though he does not focus on representations of trauma in his analyses, trauma reoccurs again and again in Narine's study since another feature of this film genre is that "a naïve Western protagonist's sense of isolation is ruptured by a traumatic event or revelation" (214). For Narine, network narratives and trauma are inherently linked because network narratives deal with the problems of capitalism and globalization and thus transport images and knowledge of trauma (213). Consequently, "Global Network Films" "challenge the meta-discourses of transnational flows, connectedness, and harmonious networked relations by embracing these logics in order to examine the trauma, impotence, mis-communication, and alienation that networks can produce" (223).<sup>104</sup> Of special significance for this paper is Narine's suggestion that trauma not only motivates the action of these films but functions also as a connection in the underlying networks:

In these films, a traumatic event or discovery typically shatters a Western protagonist's ordered world, connecting multifarious people and motivating their various journeys through the narrative action. Networks thus emerge where there appeared to be none before, and discrete agents find themselves connected (213).

The relations between networks, globalization and trauma are even more complex according to Narine. On the meta-level of international discourses on trauma, the global circulation of films which make use of network narratives to make visible traumatic experiences can "centralize these traumas at the heart of American (and global) popular culture and its discussions, enabling even the most ignorant among us to begin the work of making sense of our relation to migrant oil workers, child laborers, and Islamic militants" (Narine 224). Network narratives of trauma, then, are at the same time part of (cultural) globalization's processes and can contribute to a critique of those same and other processes. The results of Narine's film analyses thus link trauma, features of globalization and network narratives in several ways: first,

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<sup>104</sup> Moreover, the films Narine discusses "dramatize and interrogate how suffering can proliferate as transnational trading networks metastasise" ((211)) and "their relatively new 'multi-plot' grammar ... aptly envisions and 'cognitively maps' the intertwining lives enrolled in these networks" ((211)).

Narine states that network narratives are the most suitable mode of representing globalization since globalization follows network logic. Second, globalization, as prime example of a network, causes traumatization which can best be disclosed in network narratives. Third, trauma is often the driving force of network narratives. Fourth, the global circulation of network narratives in film directs attention to the traumas underlying globalization which link people from different parts of the world.

Closest to considering the relationship between network theory *and* the representation of one specific collective trauma comes Schober, who focuses in her article on *Let the Great World Spin* on McCann's use of the network for "offering an alternative conception of experiencing and dealing with contemporary reality after the events of 9/11" (392). This alternative conception is, according to Schober, based on a positive experience of being part of a network, of being connected to others, which offers stability and security (397). I agree with Schober that the novel does not succumb to typical postmodern fears of "being trapped inside a system" (Schober 387). Instead, "[t]he idea of network offers a counter-narrative to the notion of fragmentation and collapse, invoking a vision of an underlying structure which, in its creative potential, defies any complete annihilation" (Schober 401). Moreover, in Schober's argument, memory and network become intertwined since, in her view, in *Let the Great World Spin* memory is conceived of as a network "connecting to past, present, and future" (399). While Schober is certainly right in her analysis of McCann's approach to 9/11 and of his memory concept, she does not, however, consider the other traumas present in the novel and does hence not explain how networks play a role in the juxtaposed representation of several collective historical traumas.

In conclusion, even though networks have played a role in the novel since at least the 19th century, as Bordwell has shown, and despite the commonalities between the two concepts I have outlined above, network theory has so far not been applied explicitly and consistently to analyze trauma representations. However, especially with regard to novels depicting several historical traumas, bringing together network and trauma theory promises to be very productive.

#### **5.5.4. Trauma Networks and Special Time Concepts in *Let the Great World Spin***

As I have shown regarding the Vietnam War, and the terrorist attacks of September 11, for instance, various collective historical traumas play a role in McCann's novel *Let the Great*

*World Spin*. The novel's narrative structure can be elucidated by drawing on theories of network and network narrative: a central event, like the typical car accident and in this case also the tightrope performance, or a central character links apparently unconnected characters and storylines and motivates the further development of the plot. In a web of often hidden connections, the different plotlines of the novel become linked in several points through all sorts of elements, like places (the Bronx), common topics (technologic advancement, displacement), or dates (the day of the tightrope walk). In the following I will demonstrate how the combination of network and trauma concepts applied in *Let the Great World Spin* allows for linking collective historical traumas in two special ways. First, traumas become connected in a network. Second, by drawing on characteristics of network and trauma concepts, the tightrope walk connects collective historical traumas because it triggers a collapse of traditional time concepts.

The tightrope performance is of special significance for McCann's novel, for example with regard to plot development and its dealing with the events of 9/11. Being an important component of *Let the Great World Spin's* network and trauma narrative dimensions, it is also the central element in which trauma and network are interwoven. As a component of the trauma narrative, the tightrope walk stands both metaphorically for the traumatic incidents of September 11, 2001, and for trauma in general. It is also a network element since, rendered from a number of different points of views and appearing in all plotlines as characters watch it, hear accounts of it, or look at a photograph of it, it is the main narrative knot in the web of storylines and one of two central events typical of network narratives as shown by Bordwell.<sup>105</sup> It is the narrative knot in which different plotlines cross and one of the main elements which connect different characters.

### **Networks of Traumas**

The first way in which trauma and network characteristics are combined to link collective historical traumas is in networks of traumas. The idea of trauma networks takes on different shapes in McCann's novel: on the one hand, people suffering from the same trauma become connected in a network. On the other hand, different traumas become connected among each

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<sup>105</sup> The tightrope performance forms also part of a number of other networks which are not relevant for my argument. Schober, for instance, provides an analysis of how the tightrope walk is embedded in a network of gazes (395).

other. The former is the case when Gloria, Claire, and the other mothers create a network to deal with the loss of their sons in Vietnam. As analyzed, they use the mail system – also a network – to first establish their connection. During their meetings, they then built ties among each other in a network structure. The ties – or links – are used to share the traumatic loss, as expressed by their hugging and crying together (McCann, *Let* 85), for instance, and to help overcome their traumas. Claire summarizes: “We hurt, and have one another for healing” (114).

The latter notion of different collective historical traumas becoming linked in a network also takes on different forms. First, in the last chapter of the novel, the reader learns that Jaslyn carries the photograph of the tightrope walk with her wherever she travels. Through Jaslyn’s travels in a *network* of plane routes and streets, the tightrope performance – and hence 9/11 – becomes linked to other historical traumas: to the devastations and deaths brought about by the hurricanes Rita and Katrina, since Jaslyn’s job is to visit their victims to help them take care of insurance claims and tax issues (e.g. 329, 332, 337), and to the war in Afghanistan, in which Jaslyn’s sister, whom she visits in Ireland where she is stationed (341), is involved as part of her military career.

Second, the tightrope walk is not only a knot in the narrative structure of the novel, but also a central node in a web of traumas, through which connections between several collective historical traumas run. By provoking the resurgence of its audience’s experiences and memories of collective historical traumas, the tightrope act becomes linked to all of them. Marcia and Claire, for example, feel touched, bewildered, and even outraged by the walker’s performance. Marcia tells the other mothers that she was reminded of her dead son when she witnessed the performance: “And all I could think of, was, Maybe that’s my boy and he’s come to say hello” (96). In Marcia’s act of watching, the tightrope walk becomes a stand-in for her son’s death in a helicopter crash in Vietnam, not only because of the helicopter monitoring the funambulist (93–96), which is one of the iconic images linked to the Vietnam War in US public memory, but also because he is a “[v]ery brave” “[m]an in the air” (97), just like her son used to be. For Claire, too, the tightrope performance conjures up memories of her son, not because of the courage of the funambulist but because of the thoughtless way in which he risks his life. In her mind, she goes through a long list of ways of dying, which includes several ways obviously related to the Vietnam War, like “death by Agent Orange” or “death by Charlie” (113), before concluding,

But death by tightrope?

Death by performance?

That's what it amounted to. So flagrant with his body. Making it cheap. . . . How dare he do that with his own body? Throwing his life in everyone's face? Making her own son's so cheap? (113)

Since the list of possible deaths comprises also references to warfare in general, such as “death by grenade trap” or “death by pipe bomb”, and more specifically to the Second World War (“death by genocide,” “death by firing squad” (113)), the tightrope walk evokes links to a number of different wars. A special item in this list constitutes “death by water torture” since it brings to the reader's mind public discussions of US military's application of waterboarding in the aftermath of 9/11 at the Guantánamo Bay detention camp (Carter; Mladek 260), and during the Iraq War in the Abu Ghraib prison (Greenberg), for instance. Moreover, forms of water torture were apparently used in the Algerian War<sup>106</sup> (Herrmann 346; Edward Peters), the Vietnam War (Pincus), against the *Desaparecidos* in Chile and Argentina (Herrmann 99–100), and by British army and Royal Ulster Constabulary against alleged IRA members during the Troubles<sup>107</sup> (Cobain; Kearney). The tightrope performance becomes hence interwoven in a web of traumatic historical events – 9/11, the Troubles, wars in Vietnam, Europe, and Algeria – which are linked among each other by the use of one torture technique. Some of these traumas as well as several others are also evoked for the anonymous crowd watching the tightrope walk in the first chapter of the novel: There are speculations on the background of the artist – is he a protestor against Nixon and the Vietnam War (McCann, *Let* 6)? – and also “whispers that there had been a botched robbery, . . . that he'd taken hostages, he was an Arab, a Jew, a Cypriot, an IRA man” (5). I read this short passage as referring to at least four other traumatic incidents which would have been present in the mind of the New Yorker audience in 1974: “hostages”, “Arabs” and “Jews” might refer to the Munich massacre of 1972, in which Palestinians took members of the Jewish Olympic team hostage and killed them; “Arabs” and “Jews” were also on the news for waging the Yom Kippur War the previous year; “Arabs,”

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<sup>106</sup> Berthold Molden argues that the Algerian War was well known to the US public and often associated with Vietnam: “On 19 January 1963, for instance, *The Nation* wrote, ‘It [the Vietnam War] is a dirty, cruel war. As dirty and cruel as the war waged by the French forces in Algeria, which so shocked the American conscience’” ((83)). McCann hence suggests a parallel which might well have been known to US citizens in the 1960s.

<sup>107</sup> In McKay's article dealing with the British army's torturing of fourteen alleged Irish rebels (known as the ‘hooded men’), two of the victims draw a direct comparison between what was done to them in 1971 and the reports on torture in Iraq and at the Guantánamo Bay camp. Patrick McNally, for instance, is quoted saying: “When I saw pictures of hooded prisoners in Iraq I knew it was the same thing happening again” (McKay).

moreover, links the tightrope walk again back to the attackers of September 11, 2001; and “Jews” can also be read as a trace of the resurgence of Holocaust discourse at that time, an interpretation supported by Claire’s later contemplation of the term ‘Holocaust’: “that small holocaust. Terrible word. Never heard it as a child” <sup>108</sup> (80). The list continues with Cyprus, which was at the focus of international attention because of the Cyprus dispute. “IRA man” brings up the extensive IRA bomb attacks taking place in 1974, in one of which, in Dublin in spring of 1974, one of the novel’s characters is slightly injured (22). The described connections between memories of collective historical traumas create a weblike structure with the tightrope performance, and hence 9/11, as trigger at its center.

With this function of 9/11, the city of New York, as location of this central trauma and of the better part of the novel, receives further significance. Through the memories of traumatic events which took place in Vietnam, Ireland, Iraq, Afghanistan, Cyprus, Israel, Algeria, and Second World War Europe in general, New York City becomes linked to all of these places. These virtual connections summoned up by memories are corroborated and added to by the travels of the characters. Adelita apparently fled from the civil war in Guatemala (McCann, *Let* 49), Albee, one of Corrigan’s protégés, is a Hungarian Jew (32–34) who seems to have fled the Nazis (227), and the Corrigan brothers follow the long tradition of Irish men who emigrated to the United States since the 19<sup>th</sup> century mainly for economic reasons, and in this case also for fear of the Troubles. The New York City of *Let the Great World Spin* is then the geographical point in which all these personal trajectories converge – and from which others emanate, above all to Vietnam, but also to Ireland (Ciaran and Lara, Jaslyn and her sister) and to Iraq (Jaslyn’s sister). In his interview with McCann, Englander suggests that the novel’s title expresses this decisively globalization-reflecting aspect of “people moving, crossing borders, people who end up as citizens of the world” (Englander and McCann). In my view, the title of the novel and the special way in which New York is represented by McCann, suggest, however, that the city is not just a simple knot on a geographical map of trauma locations. Judge Soderberg, Claire’s husband, senses the special fabric of New York City which supports this argument. In the chapter narrated from his point of view, he muses on the city’s indifference to the past

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<sup>108</sup> Rothe argues that the Holocaust became a public concern in the US in the wake of the televising of the Eichmann trial in 1961; the term ‘Holocaust’, however, came to widespread prominence only in 1978 with the broadcasting of the TV series *Holocaust* (12).

(McCann, *Let* 248). His statement that “[t]he city lived in a sort of everyday present” (247) reconnects New York not only to Castels’ notion of “timeless time” but underlines also the ephemerality of its features. For Soderberg, it is only logical that there are hardly any monuments to be found in New York City since “the past disappeared in the city” (248). Consequently, the tightrope walker is in Soderberg’s view “such a stroke of genius. A monument in himself. He had made himself into a statue, but a perfect New York one, a temporary one, up in the air, high above the city. A statue that had no regard for the past” (248). New York City is hence represented as being made of ungraspable and ephemeral connections, two features which run contrary to the concept of a geographical map but underline its network structure, and as allowing for unusual perceptions and concepts of time. I would argue that it is due to this conception of New York City that it can trigger diachronic connections between traumas separated by time and space. Hence, while Englander has a point when he emphasizes the novel’s title’s reference to “people moving, crossing borders, people who end up as citizens of the world,” other implications seem to be more relevant in this context. On the one hand, the world’s incessant spinning seems to relate to the ever-changing nature of the network structures McCann alludes to. On the other hand, the title implies a geographical and virtual moving on, even if the world appears to be historically and geographically, that is diachronically and synchronically, pervaded by traumas. Progress is hence possible despite all struggles – maybe made possible by the synchronic and diachronic encounter of traumas at a special point like New York City.

While the so-far described connections between collective historical traumas suggest a star-like structure with the tightrope performance at its center, traumas become also linked among each other without the tightrope walk being involved, hence producing a network structure with 9/11 as just one, albeit major, hub. The Vietnam War and World War II become linked through the image of the Bronx on fire. After her visit of Gloria’s apartment, Claire is appalled by the Bronx, the “whirling litter,” the “terrible stench,” and the prostitutes, which lead her to conclude: “the fires in the sky – they should call it Dresden and be finished with it” (McCann, *Let* 82). Claire proposes here a treatment of the Bronx similar to that of Dresden during World War II, that is, “finish it” by means of extensive bombing. Considered together with the following advice Claire’s husband received as a young judge from his colleagues, a parallel between the Dresden bombings and the Vietnam War emerges: “And if he thought Manhattan was bad, he should go up to where the real fires were raging, to American Hanoi

itself, at the end of the 4 train, where the very worst of the city played itself out every day” (256). Since the end of the subway line 4 is the Bronx, McCann’s judges compare the Bronx to the Vietnamese city of Hanoi, also referring to the fires and not only prostitution, like Claire, but the crime rate in general (“the very worst of the city”). Moreover, this text passage, too, hints at bombings since Nixon ordered massive bombings of Hanoi in December 1972. When the two text passages are considered together, the Bronx thus emerges as a degenerate place worth the treatment of Dresden and Hanoi thereby linking these two places, and events, notorious for the Second World War and the Vietnam War, and suggesting parallels between them. Furthermore, the comparison between Manhattan and the Bronx drawn by the judges could be transferred to a comparison of the collective historical traumas for which these boroughs stand metaphorically: consequently, the Manhattan events of 9/11 are considered bad but the bombings of Dresden and Hanoi are worse.

The complex trauma of racism is linked to the Vietnam War, World War II, and the Holocaust in an intricate web of relations. The two text passages most indicative of these connections stem from the chapters on Gloria and on Claire. Gloria’s life, from her childhood in southern Missouri “on the colored side of town” (285) to the knowledge that no taxi driver will stop for her (300) in the novel’s present, is marked by racism. Her time at college, too, was overshadowed by racist expectations and practices. Before graduating with honors as “one of the first colored women at Syracuse to do so” (303), she is handed around at parties as an example of a well-achieving Black girl: “like a few young colored women my age – we were invited to elegant rooms, . . . and we were asked to give opinions on what had happened to our boys over Anzio, and who W.E.B. Du Bois was, and what it really meant to be emancipated, and how the Tuskegee Airmen came about, and what Lincoln would think of our achievements” (302). In these questions, inquiries regarding figures involved in the abolition of slavery (President Lincoln) and the fight for emancipation of Blacks (W.E.B. Du Bois) are mixed with allusions to aspects of the Second World War II famous for the involvement of Black soldiers, like the battle of Anzio, or the all-Black military pilots known as the Tuskegee Airmen. In this text passage, racism and the Second World War become linked on the linguistic level and because the questioners refer to those aspects of US military involvement in the war which underline the segregational practices still underway at that time, that is separate Black and white units. Followed by remarks on her failure at meeting the hosts’ expectations (“This was not the Negro they expected.” (302)), her discomfort with the way white students treated her

like an exotic being or even animal (“the fraternity boys . . . wouldn’t have minded a colored woman for a trophy: they had a safari intent to them” (302)), and other incidents of discrimination, this chapter highlights the segregational thinking of the questioners who presuppose Gloria’s belonging to a group defined by race and so different from their own that it needs explaining. The assumption that emancipation has been achieved just a few years later is directly refuted by the behavior of the questioners and the course of the chapter. This chapter hence shows how the Second World War and racism were tightly interwoven and that racist practices continue. The notion that racism against Blacks has not been overcome is taken up in the chapter on Claire, in which it becomes linked to the Vietnam War and the Holocaust. Claire is an ambivalent figure regarding racism. She is depicted as a liberal, well-meaning person who nonetheless offends Gloria. The reader learns that Claire fought against the racist attitudes of her father when she was a teenager because “[s]he hated that manner of talk” (78): “In Florida, her father had once said at dinner: *I like Negroes, yessir, I think everyone should own one*. She had stormed from the table and stayed in her room for two days” (78; emphasis in original). Even though Claire’s opposition in this instance can be read as a daughter’s revolt against her father, it is clear throughout the chapter narrated from her point of view that Claire is continuously aware of her special status as white upper-class woman. She mentions, for example, being the only white person on the subway (78) and is afraid of the doorman’s mistaking Gloria and the other women for servants (78–79). While she is apparently well-meaning, her actions and thinking are not devoid of prejudices. The main example of Claire’s subconscious racist behavior is her begging Gloria to stay a little longer with her after the other women have left, a wish which Gloria refuses decidedly:

I had the thought that we didn’t go freedom-riding years ago to clean apartments on Park Avenue, no matter how nice she was, no matter how much she smiled. . . . I was pretty sure I could’ve just sat down on the sofa and she would’ve served me hand foot, but we didn’t go marching for that either (297).

In spite of Claire’s assumed good intentions, Gloria feels uncomfortable with Claire’s proposal and is afraid of endangering her own achievements as well as those of the civil rights movement if she stays. Her intuition is apparently confirmed when Claire, upon Gloria’s refusal, offers her money to make her stay (299). Despite her unintentional racist behavior, Claire is apparently very conscious of the state of race relations in the US in 1974. Remembering Gloria’s question of whether their sons were friends in Vietnam, Claire muses in a significant text passage regarding connections between collective historical traumas:

Did she think they were friends? *Well, they could have been, Gloria, they certainly could have been.* Vietnam was as good a place to start as any. Yes indeed. Dr. King had a dream and it would not be gassed on the shores of Saigon. When the good doctor was shot, she sent a thousand dollars in twenty-dollar bills to his church in Atlanta. Her father raved and roared. Called it guilt money. She didn't care. There was plenty to be guilty for. (86; emphasis in original)

This quotation includes two relevant aspects: first, even though segregation in the army had been abolished in 1948, it was apparently still uncommon that Black and white soldiers were friends at the time of the Vietnam War. Moreover, Claire's remark that "Vietnam was as good a place to start as any" suggests that race segregation was also still common outside the military forces and a start was yet to be made to overcome the divide. Referring to the iconic figure of the civil rights movement, Dr. Martin Luther King, Claire hopes that his "dream" of equal rights for Black Americans will not die in the Vietnam War, for which Saigon stands as a *pars pro toto*. This fear was apparently shared by Dr. King who already in a 1967 speech established a connection between the civil rights movement and the war in Vietnam. In this speech, he stated that the Vietnam War "killed" the government programs for the poor of the United States of America, which were, after all, mainly non-white, and that the poor not only "fight and die in extraordinarily high proportions relative to the rest of the population", but that "the black young men" were sent "eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem" (King, Martin Luther, Jr.). Dr. King concluded that the war was the enemy of the poor and that it made all arguments for a peaceful fight for civil rights invalid (King, Martin Luther, Jr.). Not only by Dr. King, the US military was repeatedly accused of using non-white soldiers as cannon fodder, which explains higher death rates among them, during the Vietnam War and already during World War II. A statement issued by Stokely Carmichael at a session of one of the Vietnam War Crimes Tribunals, which "[employed] the methods of American citizen tribunals to prove that war crimes had been committed in Vietnam" (Molden 81), supports Dr. King's reasons for rejecting the war in Vietnam: "In order to get rid of the Blacks, they [the US] send them to the most distant fronts in Vietnam. This makes it possible for them to commit genocide against two peoples at once without having to get their own hands dirty" (Molden 89). This aspect of racist war waging practices was aggravated by the social disparities which prevailed in the US since "men from low-income social groups were twice as likely to be drafted as those from prosperous families" (Molden 89). McCann hints at this race issue linked to World War II and the Vietnam War with the death of two of Gloria's brothers in the former and the death of all

of her three sons in the latter war. Carmichael's statement evokes also the second important aspect included in the quotation from Claire's thoughts: Claire's mind drifts from the use of chemical weapons (gas) in the Vietnam War directly to the murderer of Dr. King. She hence suggests not only a connection between the Vietnam War and the symbolical death of the fight for civil rights in the United States, but also refers to the Holocaust by evoking of all things the use of gas to kill people. In this text passage, McCann picks up a marginalized discourse, coined above all by "leftist intellectuals" (Molden 81) in 1967 and 68, which accused the United States of America of committing genocide in Vietnam. According to Molden, who traces in his article the role of the Holocaust in the reference system used by international anti-colonialist and civil rights movements in the 1960s, this charge "was substantiated by the high number of victims among the civilian population, the use of chemical weapons and napalm, the destruction of resources and obligatory resettlement in hamlets", which "were repeatedly called 'concentration camps'" (86). This notion was also already included in the cited speech by Dr. King: "What do they [the Vietnamese peasants] think as we test out our latest weapons on them, just as the Germans tested out new medicine and new tortures in the concentration camps of Europe?" (King, Martin Luther, Jr.). McCann refers here to a discourse which, according to Molden, already at the end of the 1960s, that is at a time when the term 'Holocaust' was not yet fully established, raised questions on the comparability of traumas. The analogy between the Vietnam War and the Holocaust was highly disputed and "met with criticism from Holocaust survivors as inappropriate" (86). Already then, the Holocaust had hence assumed a special status as incomparable. Her feeling guilty and donating money, inscribes also Claire's thinking into discourses on the contest of victims, or a nation of victims, for instance, and it anticipates debates on reparations for victims of collective historical traumas. In my view, by ending her line of thought with the statement that "there was plenty to be guilty for," it is insinuated that Claire's guilt refers not only to the murderer of Dr. King but also to injustices committed against Blacks during slavery and its aftermath in general as well as to the use of chemical weapons in the Vietnam War. In the light of the many connections McCann establishes between the treatment of Black Americans, the war waging in Vietnam and the Holocaust, he arguably also hints implicitly at the guilty conscience of the US for not intervening earlier and more efficiently to stop the Nazi genocide.

McCann also draws a line from the Vietnam War to the more recent war in Iraq: Joshua's task of finding a way to count the dead in the Vietnam War (McCann, *Let* 83) has apparently

been accomplished – if not by him then by someone else. As Jaslyn notices, for the Iraq War, the death toll is announced on the news and in the papers like sports scores: “Baseball score, football score, another six dead in Iraq” (340), “[e]ighteen dead today” (347). Even though Joshua already knew that “[y]ou can count the dead, but you can’t count the cost” and that “[e]verything else can be measured” (83; emphasis in original), the significance of statistics has apparently remained the same. Like Claire’s, Joshua’s statements can be considered comments on public discourses on victimization and trauma, since they bring up the comparability of traumas which depends on their measurability.

The link between the Vietnam War and the hurricanes Rita and Katrina takes on yet another form. As analyzed above, the way the characters act because of their traumatization displays parallels: Claire and Gloria as well as the victims of Rita and Katrina suffer from similar symptoms of PTSD. Claire shares a certain apathy caused by trauma (89), which goes hand in hand with a wish to be dead instead of her son (84), with the old lady who tells Jaslyn about the loss of her son, the postman, and her wish to be dead (338). A second parallel constitutes the inability to talk about the trauma paired with an urgent wish to do so nonetheless. The mothers’ difficulties to speak about their trauma take expression in Gloria’s inability to write in her letter about the deaths of her sons (316), and in Claire’s confession that she never told anyone about the day when she received notice of her son’s death (111), for example. Especially in the second case, Claire expresses her relief after having told that untellable story (111). Similarly, the people who survived the hurricanes have difficulties opening up despite their need to tell their story but once they have, “they are off and chatting” (337) as Jaslyn remarks. The traumas of the Vietnam War and the hurricanes are thus linked by the similar ways of the novel's characters' dealing with them.

A subtle connection is drawn between the events of September 11, 2001, and the War in Afghanistan when Jaslyn remembers visiting Ireland “shortly after the attacks on Afghanistan” (341). In contrast to ‘war in Afghanistan’ or even ‘invasion of Afghanistan’, “attacks on Afghanistan” is not a commonly used expression as google search and native speakers both confirmed. The wording chosen by McCann hence seems to be an allusion to the common term ‘attacks on the World Trade Center’ thereby suggesting a similarity between the terrorist attacks and the course of action taken by the US in Afghanistan as reaction to the events of 9/11. This connection is also extraordinary because it is the only connection of another collective historical trauma to 9/11 which is not hinged on the tightrope walk.

## The Conflation of Time and the Juxtaposition of Traumas

Since it joins trauma and network elements, the tightrope act can link collective historical traumas in a second special way. Its functioning as metaphor for 9/11 rests partially upon its role as node in a network of (hi)stories. In the last chapter of the novel, set in 2006, Jaslyn, who was still a baby on the day of the performance, looks at a picture of it musing: “A man high in the air while a plane disappears, it seems, into the edge of the building. One small scrap of history meeting a larger one. As if the walking man were somehow anticipating what would come later. The intrusion of time and history. The collision point of stories” (325). This passage touches on several important aspects: the only retrospectively attributed anticipatory power of the tightrope walk as the reason for which it “became increasingly iconic” (Englander and McCann) and – in typical trauma terminology – the intrusive power of this metaphor. Also, and more importantly in this context, it exposes the performance’s status as a node in which different (hi)stories converge. The quoted text passage indicates a collapse or conflation of time taking place at this node; a conflation of time due to which the events of that day in 1974 become intertwined with the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, so as to seem happening at the same time. Hones explains the conflation of time at work in the novel by referring to metageography, a concept of space:

while *The Great World* does have a set of distinguishable settings, it also performs through its narrative style quite a different metageography from that of the mosaic. This alternative metageography resists a static view of world space organized according to clear borders in order to emphasize instead a global space of interconnectedness and networks, a space in which a single event may happen simultaneously in multiple locations and in which apparently singular locations embody multiple historical and social dimensions. (37)

In Hones’ view, the special metageography of the novel, which, as already mentioned, also marks it as a narrative of globalization, allows not only for the conflation of time but also of places. The global space created in *Let the Great World Spin* can hence host a location like the World Trade Center, which brings together “multiple historical and social dimensions”. The event which can take place in different places at the same time is once again the tightrope walk since the funambulist “inhabits the meadows and the city” (Hones 60) during its rehearsal. Gloria, too, apparently believes in the possibility of being in different places at the same time: “There’s a part of me that thinks perhaps we go on existing in a place even after we’ve left it” (McCann, *Let* 305). In a different approach, the conflation can be linked back to trauma theory since the collapse of the distinction between a traumatic present and a traumatic past is an accepted phenomenon in trauma discourse. Kaplan, for example, experienced a conflation of

time when faced with the events of September 11, 2001: “the new traumatic event merged with the childhood events [of World War II in England], so that history and memory, time and space collapsed into one present time of terror” (4). In *Let the Great World Spin*, however, the conflation does not bring together two traumas directly. While in this text passage the day of the walk is conflated with September 11, 2001, for Claire, it conflates that day with the time when her son fought in Vietnam. Confronted with Marcia’s account of the performance, the death of her son is suddenly “[s]o immediate. At all of their coffee mornings, it had always been distant, belonging to another day, the talk, the memory, the recall, the stories, a distant land, but this was now and real” (99).<sup>109</sup> I would hence argue that the performance of the funambulist links 9/11 and Claire’s Vietnam War trauma in one “collision point”. This special linkage becomes possible because of the unusual concept of time being at play in *Let the Great World Spin*. The traditional sequence of past, present, future is broken up and can be rearranged flexibly. It becomes clear from several passages in the novel that past and present are assumed to influence each other mutually, that the relations between them are multidirectional. Lara’s husband, for example, is sure that his paintings ruined by the rain demonstrate that the present can work on the past (134). Gloria realizes that “[s]ometimes you have to go up to a very high floor to see what the past has done to the present” (306), referring to the impact of her second failed marriage, which made her move into the projects in the Bronx, on the present, in which she seizes the chance of adopting Jazzlyn’s children, who live in the same building. This phrase can furthermore be considered a comment on the long lasting effects of slavery on the present since it occurs in a chapter which repeatedly returns to Gloria’s family’s history of enslavement, the racist behavior and attitudes she has to face in post-abolition and even post-segregation USA, and the way her behavior has been influenced by these factors. The conflation of time, or simultaneousness of events which in traditional concepts of time would be impossible, is also at work when Ciaran, surprised by a sudden onrush of memories from his childhood in Ireland, tells Lara about the one time that his mother had mistaken him for his brother: “it was a moment when he saw himself as firmly rooted in childhood, and maybe he was still there, now, today, and forever” (154). Ciaran apparently is

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<sup>109</sup> It is noteworthy that, in a parallel to many other trauma-related acts of memory, the collapse of time cannot be summoned up willingly. This is exemplified by Claire’s wish to “[collapse] all the boundaries” to “[bring] them [all the dead sons] back here now” (McCann (*Let* 107), which remains unfulfilled.

in two places at two different points in time simultaneously. Similarly, Gloria is sure that she will live forever in the moment when she decided to take in Jazzlyn's children: "If I live to be a hundred I'll still be on that street" (32). In these examples the past mainly becomes indistinguishable from the present, the relation to the future merely being hinted at by the word "forever". By contrast, when the funambulist finds himself at "the point where there was no time" (241) while walking the wire between the towers of the World Trade Center, the present is the future he experienced in advance in the past: "The wind was blowing and his body could have experienced it years in advance" (241). Even though the use of "could" suggests the mere possibility of an experience in advance, the reader knows from the first chapter narrated from the funambulist's point of view, that, indeed, he practiced to walk the rope in the wind in the meadows before the actual tightrope act in New York City, and thus his body then probably did experience in advance what he feels in the novel's present on the wire between the towers.

McCann's special time concept rests on three pillars: the experience of timeless time, the intrusive power of trauma, and a distinct concept of memory. In the chapter on Sam and his colleagues, the hackers reach a higher level of connectedness which is parred with experiences usually attributed to the globalized network society, such as a state of flow while programming (188), being surrounded by white noise (197), and vast possibilities (197). Also in the chapter on the funambulist, from which the above cited passage is taken, McCann intersperses allusions to similar experiences. The funambulist finds that there are "overlapping realities," has "[the] sense of losing himself," and all surrounding noises become "a white hum" (241). Consequently, he has the impression that time has ceased to exist and experiencing the future in advance becomes possible – Castells would call these experiences of timeless time. The second pillar is constituted by the intrusive power of trauma which is usually accompanied by a special perception of time. As shown above, triggered by the tightrope walk, the death of Claire's son suddenly intrudes into the present and influences her reaction to the performance. At the same time, Claire notices "[the] clock moving but not sounding anymore" (99), hence suggesting that there is something wrong with her perception of time. It becomes even more evident that the intrusion of trauma into the present can produce the impression that time has ceased to exist when Claire tells the other mothers about her son, and thus conjures up the Vietnam trauma for all of them, and Gloria observes that the clock on the bedside table is not working (294). The intrusion of the traumatic past into the present is also at work when Claire

offers Gloria to pay her for staying. Even though Gloria does not explicitly say that the offer conjures up memories of her family's past, the order of the text passages – Claire's offer, Gloria's statement that her grandmother and great-grandparents were slaves, her declaration that she "[knows] a thing or two about what people want to buy, and how they think they can buy it" (299), her own involvement in the civil rights movement, her eliding Claire – suggests an intrusion of the traumatic past which, moreover, affects her reaction in the novel's present.<sup>110</sup> The third condition for the special linkage between traumas emerges from a combination of the former two: the conflation of time becomes possible because of the concept of memory applied in *Let the Great World Spin*, which suggests spontaneously emerging links from the present to past and future, thus substituting unilinear understandings of time with a rhizomatic structure. As Schober remarks, memory, which in this novel is most often traumatic and "represented by a network of associative links, plays a crucial role in breaching the divide between past and present" (398). This is best illustrated by Gloria's thoughts on her impulsive decision to take in Jazzlyn's children: "I knew almost right off. Them two babies needed looking after. It was a deep-down feeling that must've come from long ago. Sometimes thinking back on things is a mistake arising out of pride, but I guess you live inside a moment for years, move with it and feel it grow, and it sends out roots until it touches everything in sight" (285). In this text passage, McCann makes Gloria refer to the aforementioned concept of the rhizome by using the term "roots" and suggesting a structure which allows for links in different directions. The chapter narrated from Adelita's point of view gives further examples of the special understanding of the working of time and its connection to memory in the novel. Adelita knows a "still point where the present, the now, winds around itself, and nothing is tangled" (279). At this point, you can be in different places at different points of time (almost) at once: "You can close your eyes and there will be a light snow falling in New York, and seconds later you are sunning upon a rock in Zacapa, and seconds later still you are surfing through the Bronx on the strength of your own desire" (279). Moreover, by the strength of her memory, Adelita can summon up Ciaran to be with her every day – even after his death in the car crash. The morning she remembers with him becomes one with all other

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<sup>110</sup> It becomes even clearer that Gloria cannot differentiate between her (family's) traumatic past and the present when she admits in the following that all she wants to do is to retreat to her apartment, listen to opera and "[drown] everything else until it was all invisible" (McCann (*Let* 301). She hence longs to apply the above analyzed mechanisms of suppression.

mornings: “It was – it is – a Thursday morning a week before the crash, and it fits in the space of every other morning I wake into” (284). It is important to note, however, that for all events in the cited passages it is true what Schober remarks on the conflation of the tightrope act and the events of 9/11, namely that there is “an *option* of linking them by means of interpretation and memory” (398) and that the established link hence “is not fixed but reversible” (Schober 398). According to Schober, Lara’s insistence on Jazzlyn’s death (McCann, *Let* 119-122, 132-4) shows that “[t]he reconfigurations [of time] that do take place rather occur within the interpretative formations of the human mind” and do “not abolish the fundamentally irreversible nature of our physical world” (Schober 400). I agree with her argument, especially in light of Lara’s parallel realization that it is impossible to “arrest the clocks, . . . rewind the life, uncrash the car” (McCann, *Let* 128).

In conclusion, one can thus argue that the network and trauma elements used in *Let the Great World Spin* not only both disturb traditional concepts of space and time, and especially of what is the ‘present’, but also reinforce each other. In a conflation of past and present typical of trauma and in a conflation of present and future made possible by network’s timelessness, which are both underpinned by a rhizomatic memory concept working independently from traditional time sequences, traumas from different points in time can become linked, that is: because traumas become ‘networked’, they can be linked.

In conclusion, the combination of trauma and network elements especially in the tightrope walk allow for a conflation of time, which in turn allows for a connection between collective historical traumas across time. On the other hand, traumas are connected in a network structure which includes smaller networks, like linking different wars associated with torture, and two major hubs, 9/11 and the Vietnam War, which are linked to an especially high number of other traumas. The connections McCann establishes between these traumas assume different shapes, some of which recall the strategies applied in other novels analyzed in this study. Apart from the conflation of time, they are connected among each other by travels of the characters, by the tightrope walk triggering memories of them, by the evocation of common elements (e.g. “death by water torture”, “counting the dead”), by similar reactions of the victims, special formulations used by the characters, or the similar evaluation of the US’s action and the feelings aroused by it. Even if some connections are relatively obvious and others emerge only in the mind of the characters, or the readers, they all share one characteristic: they are all temporary. In the light of these findings, a transfer to McNally’s “network model of

psychopathology” appears worthwhile. McNally argues that symptoms of PTSD can be treated more effectively if conceived of as nodes in a network which interrelate and activate each other. The network of traumas McCann creates seems to work analogically: the nodes, which are constituted by the different collective historical traumas, interrelate and also activate each other. The representation of one trauma usually triggers memories of at least one, if not several others, and hence evokes similarities which in turn suggest the comparability or at least an equality of the traumas.

#### 5.5.5. Subtle Criticism of the Classic Trauma Discourse and US-Politics

The analysis of *Let the Great World Spin's* ways of dealing with trauma already raised some effects of these approaches. All in all, one can deduce three main effects concerning the representation of trauma: First, as Bordwell has shown, network narratives bring to attention underlying similarities and differences. One can thus argue that McCann's weaving of a narrative web in which different collective historical traumas are linked encourages the reader to consider similarities between the collective historical traumas and ways of dealing with them. In this way, parallels between the traumatization of the survivors of the hurricanes, that of the bereaved mothers, and that of victims of racism emerge which put into question the incomparability of traumas. The novel questions the sense of measuring victimization, especially with Joshua's comment on the feasibility of counting the dead. In a letter to his mother, Joshua is well aware of the moral costs of the Vietnam war when he writes that “*You can count the dead, but you can't count the cost*” (McCann, *Let* 83; emphasis in original). Consequently, “what he really wanted was to write a program that could make sense of the dying” (88), a heroic but ultimately foredoomed attempt.

Second, different original aspects and points of debate of the classic trauma discourse are broached. The novel alludes to the impact of the Vietnam War on the classic understanding of trauma when Tillie speaks of “the vets who came back from ‘Nam all messed up in their head” (215). In half a sentence McCann brings up the psychological effects of this war which, although probably comparable to the shell shock diagnosed in soldiers of the two World Wars before, were so widespread and so thoroughgoing that in the aftermath of the Vietnam War psychological trauma became a public concern and PTSD was introduced as a medical tool to deal with it. Moreover, the introduction of the term ‘Holocaust’, a decisive step in the establishment of the genocide committed by the Nazis as cornerstone of trauma, is broached

in the novel. Another aspect of trauma discourses the novel relates to are the debates on the legitimacy of classifying racism as collective historical trauma. *Let the Great World Spin* answers this question by depicting the traumatizing effects of decades of individual and institutionalized racism in the US suggesting a link between the different instances and offering a historic background to the recent racial tensions in the US.

Third, McCann's approach exposes the benefits of creating links. As Cusatis, Schober, and Flannery (*Colum*), for instance, show, the need for imaginative acts of creation and, especially, imaginative acts of establishing connections is one important theme of *Let the Great World Spin*. Again, the tightrope act embodies this theme by connecting the two towers of the World Trade Center in a huge imaginative effort. Furthermore, the connections which McCann invites the reader to create suggest a possible solution for the problems the epigraph poses: "All the lives we could live, all the people we will never know, never will be, they are everywhere. That is what the world is" (McCann, *Let* epigraph). The novel offers two ways of approaching the impossibility to get to know strangers and their lives: the chapter on Sam, the programmer from Palo Alto, proposes that it is possible to establish a connection to a person, even if one will never know her because she lives across the continent, and that this connection allows for putting oneself in the place of that person. Talking to Sable on the phone makes it possible for Sam to see what she sees ("all the thousands off the buses and the trains" (McCann, *Let* 195)) and live her life for a moment ("I can see Sable, in my mind's eye, walking away, down the street, up into the World Trade Center towers, to the fifty-ninth floor, all woodwork and file cabinets, saying hello to the lawyers" (196)). The novel presents this experience as positive, Sam becomes "some sort of brand-new guy" (196). The second approach draws on the analyzed combination of trauma and network concepts. The conflation of time it produces makes it possible to become alive in bodies, places, and times not one's own. For example, reading a novel which is, on the surface, about a group of characters living in New York in August of 1974, but conflates this moment with the terrorist attacks of 2001 and their aftermath, makes it possible for the readers to experience these two periods and relate them to their own experiences. The combined trauma and network approach can hence account for an effect Cusatis describes: "McCann's novel hints at the tragic parallels between 1974 and the aftermath of 9/11 – the Vietnam War and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, diminished trust in Presidents Richard Nixon (who resigned the day after Petit's walk) and George W. Bush, questions of faith and values during both eras" (197). This effect is increased by the criticism of

the Vietnam War, which echoes criticism of the course of action President Bush's administration took after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, expressed by some of McCann's characters. Lara, for example, accuses the Nixon administration of spreading false information on the war in Vietnam to such a degree that she is not able to discern what really happened: "I thought I knew what Vietnam was – we would leave it all rubble and bloodsoak. The repeated lies become history, but they don't necessarily become the truth" (129). Lara's criticism is not only reminiscent of Joshua's in questioning the motives of the feasibility for waging this war and the reliability of those responsible. It also brings to mind the "repeated lies" by the Bush administration which claimed the existence of chemical weapons in Iraq to justify an invasion. Moreover, also the friendship formed between Gloria and Claire, two women from very different backgrounds, illustrates the benefits of creating exceptional links. Schober suggests a positive connotation of the network concept in *Let the Great World Spin*:

The individual act of creating a line is foregrounded, the process of connecting, rather than the feeling of being trapped inside a system. The network is no longer an uncontrollable force imposed on the individual, but one that is actively created by the individual, who, through his/her interconnectedness within the network, experiences a sense of security. (397)

This process takes place when Claire and Gloria connect in a network of traumas via the shared traumatic loss of their sons across racial and social boundaries. Claire's thoughts support this reading: "Let me tell you, Gloria, the walls between us are quite thin. One cry and they all come tumbling down" (McCann, *Let* 78). The "cry" as expression of pain is here invested with the power to break down the wall and the spatial distance separating Gloria, the poor Black character from the Bronx, and Claire, the rich white character living on Park Avenue. Jaslyn's memories indicate that the consequently formed friendship between Claire and Gloria lasts for the rest of their lives (330). Gloria's thoughts, while holding hands with Claire, suggest that this bond helps the two women overcome their traumatic loss: "I reached across and held her hand. I had no fear now" (321). Echoing the bond between Hosanna and Gilda in the first part of *What You Owe Me*, Gloria and Claire, linked by trauma and friendship, leave fear behind and achieve a feeling of security. The women's reaching out to each other also evokes Schober's suggestion that "[i]f the individual cannot create meaning by purely 'existing,' the act of creating connections, of relating to others, becomes vital" (396). How vital the connections to other people are in *Let the Great World Spin* is highlighted by Tillie's committing suicide after being cut off from her friends and family. Gloria's and Claire's relationship constitutes an example of

an imaginative act of connection since overcoming the social and racial differences between the two women requires an imaginative effort by which, moreover, the US trauma of racism is, in a way, left behind. Consequently, in my reading, the ways in which characters are linked in McCann's novel by a trauma network, can fulfill what Dalley considers a trajectory of trauma theory, namely "moving from pain to recognition to solidarity" (373). This is not only the case with the network linking characters with the same trauma but rings also true for the other networks of traumas. The many diverse connections McCann establishes between different collective historical traumas highlight commonalities instead of differences. *Let the Great World Spin* is hence an example of Ganteau and Onega Jaén's claim, which brings together trauma and network concepts unconsciously, that "what the trauma narratives . . . seem to promote is a model of humanity – individual and collective – defined through openness to risk and suffering, thus interdependence" (12) and that trauma narratives "are fuelled by anti-totalising claims" (13). The idea of an "essential human unity" (Cusatis 178) is symbolized in the novel by the coin Lara is given after her drug caused break-down in a street since the quarter bears the traditional US-American motto "*E pluribus unum*" (McCann, *Let* 125), Latin for "out of many, one". The fact that McCann's notion of human unity relies not only on relationality but also on suffering as common trait, as Ganteau and Onega Jaén suggest, surfaces in one of Claire's statements: "Death, the greatest democracy of them all. . . . Happens to us all. Rich and poor" (McCann, *Let* 107). One can hence read *Let the Great World Spin*, on the one hand, as a call for reclaiming the essential unity of men, which shows in suffering and death, and as a response to Rothberg's call for overcoming the paradigm of the incomparability of historical traumas by invoking "imaginative links" (*Multidirectional* 18) between them. On the other hand, by offering the possibility of diverse connections, the novel incorporates the subtext of its title, the utopian belief in change and the power of creation to deal with grief. As McCann put it in an interview: "I'm interested in finding out these connections that we have with others, and how these connections can rescue the beauty in our lives" (Lennon, "First" 175).

Fourth, by creating all these different links and a narrative depending on them, McCann draws attention to the links as such. As Lennon puts it: „In life, we rarely see how we connect with strangers, just as none of the characters see all the connections that link their lives with one another. In fiction, such connections can be observed" (Lennon, "Country" 99). In network theory, connections are of special significance. Schober, referring to Duncan J. Watts, remarks that "[t]he network logic ascribes individual nodes significance only in relation to others. It is

the connection that counts, not the individual existence” (Schober 395). In line with Bordwell’s findings, in *Let the Great World Spin*, the invisible but meaningful connections come to the fore, if only temporarily, due to the network narrative elements used. As I have shown, there are various types of connections established in *Let the Great World Spin*, “[places] and people are connected by stories, images, histories, and memories” (Hones 82), for instance. In the context of this paper, memories, especially traumatic memories, play an important role as connective elements. McCann alluded to this aspect in his interview with Lennon stating that, although the characters “do not know how latticed they are in the world”, “they fight on” because “they feel some ancient music there. There is a sort of memory in connectivity. There is also a memory in survival. A grand, ancient, human memory” (Lennon, “First” 175). In this quotation, the memory of survival, which could also be termed ‘traumatic memory’, emerges as the major element connecting humanity over time. This notion is illustrated in the novel by the many examples of individual and institutionalized racism, for example, which span more than one hundred years of US history. Among the connections *between* traumas carved out above, some emerge as particularly significant with regard to discourses on the comparability of traumas or the contest between them since they emphasize commonalities hurtful for those involved: common torture techniques, the attempt to keep track of the high number of victims, the psychological and bodily aftereffects, and the government’s nontransparent and unduly reactions.

### 5.6. Interim Conclusions: 9/11 as Collision Point of Traumatic (Hi)stories

In *Let the Great World Spin*, McCann draws connections between the collective historical traumas of racism and slavery, the Vietnam War, different aspects of the Second World War, the hurricanes Rita and Katrina, the IRA bombings and The Troubles, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, for instance, by applying different stylistic and linguistic means. Concerning the establishment of connections that are not directly related to trauma and with regard to the other novels analyzed in this study, one further strategy are noteworthy: *Let the Great World Spin* shares with *What You Owe Me* the use of analogy to highlight commonalities between separate historic events. Lara compares the Watergate scandal with the Vietnam War; for her, the Watergate scandal is “[a]nother sort of Napalm descending at home” (McCann, *Let* 131). The quoted sentence is reminiscent of Campbell’s character Hosanna mentioning that her friend compared racism against Blacks in the US to the persecution of the Jews by the Nazis: “Gilda said it was another kind of death camp, that the poison gas came out in spurts”

(Campbell 14). The sentence structure and choice of words are similar in suggesting a comparability of the two events alluded to since one is just “another sort” or “another kind” of the other. Even though Lara introduces with the Watergate scandal an event which is usually not considered traumatic, it is notable that the two quotes resemble each other also in the use of toxic gas as *pars pro toto* standing in for the past event which functions as measuring rod for the more recent one. The analogic form found in both novels hence puts into question the incomparability of historic events and thus also the incomparability of traumas. Also Jaslyn’s quoted remark, “on TV news of 6 dead in Iraq, no hurricanes” (McCann, *Let* 340), hints at a possible analogy between the war and the hurricanes.

In conclusion, *Let the Great World Spin* negotiates trauma and trauma discourses in a number of more or less open ways. Classical trauma discourse has influenced the depiction of characters as traumatized and of their ways of dealing with their traumatization. The introductory quotation to the analysis of *Let the Great World Spin* illustrates some of its main strategies in connecting collective historical traumas: The novel makes use of the possibilities of time conflation network concepts offer, it presents a metaphor of the events of 9/11 as trigger and hub in a network of traumas, and it puts 9/11 in a succession of events whose representations influence each other. In *Let the Great World Spin*, 9/11 is the collision point, around which a web of traumas crystallizes and through which traumatic histories are linked equitably. Emphasizing common traits and effects of collective historical traumas from different times and places, McCann’s novel mirrors the express wish the author voiced in the aftermath of 9/11: “If there is any triumph to come from this it will be that the grief-stricken will all be acknowledged and that race, color, and creed will all be irrelevant” (quoted in: Cusatis 201). Regarding discourses on victimization, contests between victims, and the comparability of traumas, the novel thus presents a critical if not even confutative response to them. In its approach to representing a plurality of traumas and offering points of entrance for analytic tools usually not used to analyze trauma representations, McCann’s novel thus parallels Foer’s novel.

## 6. *Great House*

This chapter's structure is analogous to the chapter on *What You Owe Me*. It briefly presents *Great House's* structure and content, then gives an overview of the collective historical traumas it includes. By giving examples of classic representations of trauma in the novel, the third subchapter illustrates what traces of the influence of the classic trauma discourse can be found in the novel. The subsequent chapter places the novel in the context of literary strands which broach similar topics, that is in testimonial and Holocaust writing. In subchapter five, I will give a close reading of the novel to elucidate how it links traumas and positions itself regarding the Caruthian trauma discourse and discourses on uniqueness. This chapter applies classic tools of literary analysis and of trauma representations. Finally, I will sum up the most important findings of the close reading in a short concluding chapter.

### 6.1. Introduction to the Novel

In her novel *Great House* from 2010, Nicole Krauss establishes intricate and subtle connections between four plotlines told by five different narrators and mainly set at three different places, New York, Jerusalem, and London. The novel is divided into part I and part II, each of which contains four chapters. The titles of the first three chapters of part I recur in different order in part II.

The first chapter of part I and the second chapter of part II are entitled "All Rise". They are told from a first-person point of view, the narrator being Nadia, a writer from New York. The frame narrative of the two chapters is set in a hospital in Jerusalem where Nadia relates events from her life to a concrete listener whom she frequently addresses as "Your Honor" or "you". The reader learns only close to the end of the novel that the narrator speaks indeed to a judge, as the address "Your Honor" and the chapter title "All Rise" imply. In the first of the two chapters, Nadia's story begins with the breakup with her boyfriend R in 1972, which leaves her alone in her apartment in New York with hardly any furniture left. She is then introduced to a young Chilean poet named Daniel Varsky who lets her use his furniture, among them a huge desk, until his possible return from Chile. Since Varsky disappears in Chile, apparently having fallen victim to Augusto Pinochet's military dictatorship, Nadia becomes the owner of his furniture, which has come to play an important role in her writing process. After a leap to the year 1999 in which an Israeli woman claiming to be Varsky's daughter calls and asks her for the desk, the narrator returns to an account of her failed marriage which took place after she

wrote her first novel on Varsky's desk. The chapter ends with Nadia recounting the panic attacks she experienced after she had had to give up Varsky's desk and her consequent decision to travel to Jerusalem. The second chapter entitled "All Rise" starts with the frame narrative: Nadia shares with the addressee of her story the doubts she is experiencing about the feeling of specialness on which she relied all her life. She then returns to the time after she found out that Varsky was dead and the devastating consequences the news had on her writing and consequently also on her marriage. The chapter ends with Nadia's account of her stay in Israel, of how she met a young man who looked like Varsky, how she tried to find the woman who collected the desk and how she came to run the judge, to whom she speaks in the hospital, over with a car.

The second chapter of part I and the first chapter of part II are entitled "True Kindness". The first-person narrator is Aaron, an Israeli prosecutor, who also tells the story to a person he addresses as "you". The addressee of the story turns out to be the younger of his two sons, Dovik. The reader can only deduce that Dovik is the same man Nadia talks to in the hospital from Nadia's explanation that she sits with the injured man till his father arrives and from Aaron's concern because Dovik has not come home as usual which prompts him to call all hospitals (Krauss, *Great* 198). The frame narrative of the two chapters is also set in Jerusalem at the time of the funeral of Aaron's wife Eve for which Dovik has returned from London where he works as a judge. Aaron starts his account with a story Dovik once told him about sharks who are wired to people sleeping to absorb all their nightmares. Due to this story, he felt impelled to discourage his son from becoming a writer. In the following, the narrator alternates between memories of the difficulties he had understanding Dovik and relating to him during his childhood and youth, of his wife's death and the funeral, and thoughts on death, war and writing in general. The second chapter entitled "True Kindness" starts with Aaron's description of the routine he and Dovik have established living together after the funeral. The memories Aaron renders in this chapter include, most notably, an account of his sons' military service and Dovik's subsequent traumatization as well as other instances in which he felt unable to understand and connect to his son. Death and ways to break the silence between himself and the younger of his two sons are recurring themes of this chapter.

The third pair of chapters, which includes the third chapters of parts I and II of the novel, is entitled "Swimming Holes". The first-person narrator is Arthur Bender, a retired Oxford literature professor. He gives a written (Krauss, *Great* 91) retrospective account of his life with

his wife Lotte Berg, a Jewish writer. The story is mostly set in London. In the first chapter of the pair, Arthur remembers how, in 1970, Lotte cultivated a short, intense and mysterious friendship to a young Chilean named Daniel Varsky, who disappeared together with Lotte's huge desk, and how devastated Lotte was by the news of her friend's being murdered by Pinochet's henchmen. Moreover, the narrator imparts the story of Lotte, who, at the beginning of World War II, managed to flee from a Polish transit camp as chaperon of a *kindertransport* leaving behind her whole family. Arthur regularly hints at his wife's taciturnity and relates how he only found out about a child she gave away because, shortly before her death, Lotte, who suffered from Alzheimer's disease, felt the urge to report her "crime". In the second "Swimming Holes" chapter, Arthur records Lotte's death and his travels afterwards, especially a visit he paid to the adoptive parents of Lotte's son, who, he learns, had died many years before. The chapter ends with the narrator being called on surprisingly by a man called Weisz who is looking for Lotte's desk. Arthur at first suspects the man to be the lover who gave the desk to Lotte, but he soon finds out that Weisz is an Israeli antiques dealer who finds furniture lost during World War II for Holocaust survivors. Since the desk disappeared with Varsky years ago, Arthur can only pass Varsky's diary to Weisz to help him.

Part I of the novel is concluded by a chapter entitled "Lies Told by Children". The first-person narrator is Isabel, an American who went to England in the 1990s to write a doctoral thesis. She tells the story of her relationship with the siblings Yoav and Leah Weisz, the children of the antiques dealer Weisz, who appears here for the first time in the novel. Isabel narrates how she fell in love with Yoav in 1998 and only some months later went to live with him and his sister in a London house equipped with furniture their father stores for sale. When, six months later, Isabel has to travel to New York, the siblings break all ties with her and disappear. Six years later, Isabel receives a letter from Leah explaining their disappearance by the suicide of their father and asking her to come to Jerusalem to help Yoav break free from the depressive reclusion they have retreated to to punish themselves. From Leah's letter it also becomes clear that Weisz was obsessed with reassembling the furniture of his father's study to rebuild it in Jerusalem exactly like it was when the Gestapo raided his family's house in Budapest in 1944. The only piece of furniture he was unable to locate was his father's desk and when he finally found it, he committed suicide, confirming Leah's worries who had kept the knowledge of the desk's whereabouts from her father. The chapter furthermore includes a short account of the siblings' motherless childhood travelling around with their father, and of a trip to Belgium Yoav

and Isabel undertook on business of Yoav's father. It ends with Isabel's description of Leah's return from New York where she went to reclaim a desk for her father thereby confirming that Leah is the woman who contacted Nadia about Varsky's desk.

A short chapter called "Weisz" concludes part II and thus the whole novel. As the title implies, the first-person narrator is the antiques dealer and father of Yoav and Leah, George Weisz. The chapter starts with a "riddle" asking where the stone that broke the window of a family's home in Budapest in 1944 landed. This section is followed by alternating accounts of Weisz's leaving Hungary for Israel in 1949 and starting a business there, of how he bought a house for his wife, which the "Arab" owners had to abandon in a hurry, of memories of his father and his huge desk, and of the travels with his children after his wife's death. The chapter, and the novel, ends with Weisz remembering how he found his father's desk where Leah hid it in New York and of the relief he felt. This anecdote is interrupted by one paragraph in which Weisz predicts that his daughter Leah will never have children but that she will pass the key and the name of the storage room in New York to Yoav's child.

All plot lines have in common that they are told from a first-person point of view and that the name of the narrator is only mentioned in passing and relatively late in the story. In the chapters in which Aaron and Nadia are the narrators, a frame narrative can be discerned which serves as setting from which the narrators remember and retell past events. Moreover, all chapters are subdivided into sections which mark the different layers of the stories which are never rendered chronologically but in pieces the reader (or the narrated addressee) has to put together.

## **6.2. Collective Historical Traumas in *Great House*: The Holocaust, the Military Dictatorship in Chile, War and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

### **War and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

There are two characters in *Great House* who were traumatized by what they experienced during their military service: Aaron and Dovik. Aaron fought in the Arab-Israeli War of 1948 and the Suez War of 1956 for Israel, and had to witness, among other things, how a fellow soldier was killed by a shell bomb (Krauss, *Great* 48). Dovik's war experience has an even more clearly traumatic quality: the tank in which Dovik fought was hit, a fellow soldier died immediately while he was left behind in the desert with another wounded fellow soldier (187). The war in which Dovik fought is not named directly but the novel probably refers to the Yom

Kippur War of 1973 since Aaron recalls that “On that Saturday in October [when Dovik leaves unexpectedly to fight], your mother and I were at home when we heard the air raid sirens. We turned on the radio but, being Yom Kippur, there was only dead air” (182). The reaction of Dovik’s parents illustrates that the Israeli population knows the horrors of war and dreads them collectively: “The shock was terrible: we had convinced ourselves that we were finished with wars” (182). Dovik’s mother even tried to convince her husband to leave Israel so their sons would not have to fight (48) but Aaron was too settled in Israel to leave (49). His wish that there would be no more wars when their children were old enough to fight (48) does not come true, however.

Related to the wars in which Israel was involved are other aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Aaron describes one of the many bomb attacks committed by Palestinian fighters to terrorize the Jewish population of Israel: “The second time they bombed the number 18 bus I was two blocks away” (197). The novel depicts also the Israeli’s share in the conflict by referring to the eviction of Arab families (285) to which Aaron apparently contributed in his function as judge (181).

### **The Holocaust**

The historical trauma of the Holocaust appears in different shapes in *Great House*. Two characters were directly traumatized by the Holocaust: George Weisz was traumatized by the detention of his parents by the Gestapo as well as the subsequent death of his father on a death march and the ransacking of his family’s home in Budapest by Nazis and neighbors. The other character traumatized directly by the Holocaust is Lotte, who, after her deportation from Nuremberg to a Polish camp, managed to flee to London in 1939 and whose whole family was killed by the Nazis.

The Holocaust is also a specter looming large in all plotlines and a point of reference for many characters. Weisz’s children are afraid of the furniture he brings to their house because they expect their dead grandparents to pop out of them (115). Isabel is confronted with the legacy of the Holocaust that rules the siblings’ lives when she accompanies Yoav on a trip to Belgium to retrieve furniture for his father. The seller of the furniture looks like Heinrich Himmler to her eyes. The fact that she later has to “admit that the likeness to Himmler, so striking before, faltered and grew dim, and that the association I’d made was probably born of my limited knowledge about the nature of Weisz’s business” (149) underlines the impact of Weisz’s Holocaust traumatization which obviously not only influences his children but also the

perceptions of their friend. The Holocaust appears once more during their stay when Isabel finds herself in a room full of furniture that reminds her of photographs of the depots in which the Gestapo stored furniture of deported Jews (155–56). This association is supplemented by Isabel's remembering a photograph of Jews in *Umschlagplatz* next to the Warsaw Ghetto (155). Aaron's reaction to what he calls Dovik's "fits" is another example of how the Holocaust functions as background to all present actions and as point of reference for acts of meaning construction: "When I was your age . . . there was nothing to eat, and no money for toys, the house was always cold, but we went outside and played . . . and lived because we had our lives, while the others were being murdered in the programs" (Krauss, *Great* 73). During his childhood, Dovik is chastised by Aaron for his pickiness, the latter contrasting Dovik's spoiled childhood with the hardships of his own, which he willingly accepted because "the others were being murdered in the programs" (73). The father of the fellow soldier he could not save moreover abuses Dovik by calling him a coward in comparison to the "courage of the Jewish inmates" of Birkenau (188), and Aaron asks Dovik with regard to his BMW: "You have to specially pay extra for a car made by the sons of Nazis?" (59).

In conclusion, the Holocaust is the direct cause of Lotte's and Weisz's traumatization. For several other characters, especially for those living in Israel, it is an omnipresent point of reference and an organizing principle.

### **Military Dictatorship in Chile**

"Chile's 1973 crisis," as Stern terms it (*Reckoning* xxvii), unquestionably constitutes a collective historical trauma. The horrors reported were such that

[f]or the world human rights movement . . . Chile's 1973 crisis and violence constituted a turning point. It marked a 'before' and 'after' by galvanizing new memberships in human rights organizations such as Amnesty International; . . . by spreading 'human rights' as an international vocabulary and common sense (xxvii).

Although there is no direct representation of the terrible deeds of the Pinochet regime, the novel's repeated allusions to it foreground the traumatic quality of the events for the victims: Lotte, for example, receives news that Varsky has been missing for five months and that his family believe he was tortured and killed (Krauss, *Great* 104). Nadia recounts some of the places which have come to symbolize Pinochet's dictatorship: "Villa Grimaldi", "38 Calle Londres, Cuatro Alamos, or the Discoteca also known as Venda Sexy because of the sexual atrocities

performed there and the loud music the tortures favored” (13). The fact that Varsky was tortured appears again in the second chapter narrated by Nadia (204).

In contrast to the other collective historical traumas Krauss’ novel deals with, there are no characters who have suffered direct traumatization from the military dictatorship in Chile. Daniel Varsky, the sole character who becomes victim of Pinochet’s policy of persecution, torture and secret murder, only appears in the novel before he leaves for Chile and is thus not depicted as traumatized. Consequently, the military dictatorship in Chile plays a special role in *Great House* since it is a constant presence in the novel despite the absence of direct victims. This impression is underlined by the reappearance of Varsky in all plotlines.

Conclusively, in Krauss’ novel, most characters have experienced directly or indirectly one of several different historical traumas. In the background of all plot lines looms the Holocaust. Even though only two of the characters, Lotte and George Weisz, had to suffer from Nazi deportation and extermination, several other characters are impacted by the marks the Holocaust has left on their families or even the whole society they live in. Another historical trauma, which appears in the novel, is that of war: Dovik and Aaron are both traumatized by wars they fought for Israel. Linked to this trauma are the references to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, another collective historical trauma that is ongoing. Finally, the historical trauma of Pinochet’s dictatorship in Chile plays an important role in the novel. Accordingly, also in *Great House*, like in the other novels analyzed in this study, the characters show several classic trauma symptoms which I will turn to in the following subchapter.

### 6.3. Classic Representations of Trauma in *Great House*

In *Great House*, like in the other novels analyzed in this study, the characters show several classic trauma symptoms.

#### Language Suggestive of Trauma

Weisz’s traumatization is reflected in his language. He presents the arrest of his family by the Nazis as a sudden intrusion changing his life forever: “The glass shatters, the boy covers his head, the mother screams. At that moment the life they know ceases to exist” (Krauss, *Great* 283). This text passage stands out because of the depersonalized language used and because Weisz’s very own experience is presented as a “riddle”. The depiction of these formative events thus bespeaks Weisz’s emotional detachment. In another instance, Weisz’s language is again suggestive of trauma when he includes an image typical of trauma: He explains to Arthur that

it is so important for his clients, who survived the Holocaust, to regain their furniture because they have “bent their memories around a void” (275).<sup>111</sup> Weisz thus mimics psychology’s description of the absence of structure and representable experience caused by trauma as a hole in the mental tissue (Bohleber, “Entwicklung” 831; Varvin 165). Leah takes up this image when she writes to Isabel about the desk that is missing from the study rebuilt by her father: “*where it should have stood, there was a gaping hole*” (Krauss, *Great* 116; emphasis in original). Consequently, the missing piece of furniture is here equated with the memory of the trauma that is a hole in the mental representation of the past. When the “void” is finally filled, there is “the relief of something at least sinking away” (289), hence the possibility of letting go of the past and finding peace.

### Survivor’s Guilt

Furthermore, the author shows how the memory of the traumatic experience influences Weisz’s life even decades after the original event. “*He was burdened with a sense of duty that commanded his whole life*” (Krauss, *Great* 115; emphasis in original), his daughter notes in the letter to Isabel in which she explains the sibling’s disappearance due to their father’s suicide. Her remark alludes to the phenomenon of survivor’s guilt which describes the feelings of bad conscience survivors of a tragic event might experience for having survived while others have not (Bohleber, “Entwicklung” 812). In Weisz’ case, the survivor’s guilt causes him to feel obliged to restore his father’s study and devote his life to this task. Weisz dedicates the present to making up for his guilt, probably because “His memory is more real to him, more precise, than the life he lives, which becomes more and more vague to him” (Krauss, *Great* 276). In this quotation, taken from Weisz’s explanations to Arthur, Weisz offers a characterization of his customers, and thus of himself since he is the one looking for the desk, as living in the past – another typical experience of traumatized persons (Bohleber, “Entwicklung” 827)

In Arthur’s account, there is a hint that also Lotte suffers from survivor’s guilt because she had to leave her parents behind in the Polish camp: “When her chaperone visa came through, it must have felt like a miracle. Of course it would have been unimaginable not to take

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<sup>111</sup> Weisz allegedly speaks of his customers in general but the reader knows that he is describing his own feelings since he has come to Arthur to find the desk missing from the rebuilt study of his own father.

it and go. But it must have been equally unimaginable to leave her parents. I don't think Lotte ever forgave herself for it" (Krauss, *Great* 98).

### Repression

When, shortly after the Suez Crisis, his wife begs him to leave Israel, so their sons would not have to fight, Aaron does not consent although, at least in retrospective, he admits that the cruelties of the war marked him strongly. He displays several symptoms of traumatization: After witnessing a fellow soldier being "blown to bits" (Krauss, *Great* 48) by a shell and saving parts of his body from the dogs, Aaron does not want to dwell on the traumatic memories and reactions to them: "Pass over it. What's the use of going into these things?" (49). This statement is suggestive of his attempt to repress this traumatic part of his past. Aaron uses the expression "Pass over it" repeatedly when he touches upon unpleasant memories, like that of his wife's death or of fearing for his children. It is thus a marker of the inadvertent intrusion of traumatic memories which he tries to push back.<sup>112</sup>

Lotte, too, suffers from several typical trauma symptoms as the reader learns from Arthur's narrative: "she avoided anything that reminded her" (87) and does not speak of her past since "that is how she dealt with the past: in total silence" (103). The repression of the painful memories is so vital to Lotte that she makes clear to her husband "that her sanity, her ability to carry on with life, both her own and the one we had forged together, depended on her ability and my solemn agreement to cordon off those nightmarish memories, to let them sleep like wolves in a lair, and to do nothing that might threaten their sleep" (246).

### Inability to Build Thick Relations

Since Lotte avoids talking about the past, her husband's belief in the source of her traumatization is shaken by the revelation that Lotte gave away a child shortly after the war (Krauss, *Great* 99). I would argue, however, that the Holocaust is the key event in Lotte's past and that the loss of her child merely reinforced her traumatization. One could even argue that the act of giving away her child was a consequence of her inability to establish interpersonal relations (Varvin 143–144) caused by the traumatic loss of her parents in the Holocaust and facilitated by affective hebetude which is a symptom of survivor's guilt (Bohleber,

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<sup>112</sup> For an analysis of the meaning of the phrase with regard to the traditional Jewish rituals of Passover and Pesach see Berger and Milbauer (80).

“Entwicklung” 812). In a similar vein, Aaron’s inability to build thick relations<sup>113</sup> to his son, to communicate with him and other family members (Krauss, *Great* 48, 50, 69, 174, 178, 179, 190) can be read as consequences of his traumatization (Varvin 138-9, 144-5).

### **Clinging to Routines**

In a life marked by a traumatic past, Lotte finds comfort in routines as Arthur mentions repeatedly (e.g. Krauss, *Great* 75, 77): “our life together was organized around protecting the ordinary . . . Lotte was unnerved by disruptions to our habits. I tried to insulate her from the unexpected; the smallest change in plan threw her completely” (85). Clinging to routines is a reaction of trauma victims to the overwhelming feelings of helplessness and unaccountability experienced during the traumatic event since it offers comfort through reliability. Lotte’s harsh reaction to unexpected changes in her life suggests that she, too, cherishes reliable structures and alludes to her mood swings, which can also be the result of her traumatization. In a later passage, Arthur mentions that Lotte loses her temper and turns cold unexpectedly (99) explaining her behavior by her traumatic past. This explanation recalls the classic trauma symptom of chronic irritability (Bohleber, “Entwicklung” 809).

### **Emptiness and Withdrawal from Life**

During his combat mission, Dovik is wounded and has to choose between leaving a fellow soldier behind in the desert and probably dying alongside him because he cannot carry the other soldier across the sand (Krauss, *Great* 187). After choosing to save his own life, Dovik returns home in an almost prototypical state of PTSD as Aaron’s description shows:

When you came home at last you were neither the soldier I had watched disappear into the crowd, nor the boy I knew. You were a kind of shell, emptied out of both of those people. You sat mute in a chair in the corner of the living room . . . and winced when I went to touch you. From your wound, but also, I sensed, because you could not bear such contact. (186)

Dovik is depicted as mute, hypersensitive, and empty. His already deplorable state worsens when the long shadow of the Holocaust touches upon him: After returning the watch of the soldier he had to leave behind to the soldier’s parents, he receives a letter from the father

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<sup>113</sup> In Margalit’s sense of the term (7-8) “thick relations are grounded in attributes such as parent, friend, lover, fellow-countryman”, “[t]hick relations are anchored in a shared past or moored in shared memory” (7), “caring is the attitude at the heart of our thick relations” (37). Margalit even mentions that “loyalty and shared traumatic experience” constitute “very thick relations” (39).

blaming him for his son's death and calling him, among other things, a coward. Aaron describes the consequences of the accusatory letter:

Whatever fragile wholeness you had managed to preserve was shattered when you read it. You lay in bed with your face to the wall, and wouldn't get up and wouldn't eat. You refused to see anyone, numbing yourself with the opiate of silence. Or perhaps you were trying to starve the little surviving portion of yourself to death. (188)

You ceased to live. (189)

The shattered self as well as numbness, retreat from life and silence are all typical symptoms omnipresent in psychological trauma discourse. According to Aaron, Dovik remained in this state for almost half a year until, unexpectedly, he decides to leave Israel to study law in London. By "fleeing" from home and the memories connected to it, Dovik deals with his traumatization by avoiding it, a line of action he also adopts in London where he buries himself in work (193).<sup>114</sup>

The depiction of Dovik suggests that he suffer from depression. The depiction of Weisz, by contrast, reveals his traumatization, but does not insinuate a depression. His suicide, recounted in Leah's letter to Isabel (113), thus takes the reader by surprise. Leah's letter offers a possible reason for her father's suicide which is related to the traumatic loss of Weisz's parents. Weisz's failure to rebuild his father's study, because Leah refuses to let him know where she hid the desk, squashed his hope that "*by putting all the pieces back together he might collapse time and erase regret*" (Krauss, *Great* 116; emphasis in original). It seems that to continue his life full of guilt is impossible for Weisz.

## Nightmares

In *Great House*, several characters suffer from nightmares that originate from their trauma. Aaron screamed in the nights and suffered from nightmares after he returned from war (Krauss, *Great* 48–49). Lotte "shouts out in her sleep" when she dreams of her father whom she had to leave behind when she fled from the Nazis (79). Yoav (119) and Nadia (13) have nightmares caused by the traumas from which they suffer indirectly, as I will show in the

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<sup>114</sup> For Berger and Milbauer, Dovik's departure to London is also linked to the Holocaust: "Responding to his war trauma, Dov literally flees the burden of his Holocaust legacy by leaving the Jewish State" (78). I find this view overemphasizes the significance of Holocaust memory for Dovik's suffering, even though the comparison drawn between his alleged cowardice and the courage of the inmates of the extermination camps certainly intensified his reaction to his war.

following section. Finally, even the story inside the story, Dovik's shark story, deals with nightmares, and looks for a way to dispose of them.

### **Transgenerational Transmission and Vicarious Trauma**

The novel features characters suffering from symptoms of traumatization which form part of the catalogue of PTSD symptoms and hence of the classic understanding of trauma. Krauss refers also to two concepts which attempt to illuminate indirect forms of traumatization. The Holocaust is presented as cause of the transgenerational traumatization of Leah and Yoav Weisz, and Nadia can be argued to suffer from vicarious trauma because of the disappearance of Varsky.

The phenomenon of transgenerational trauma was first discovered in children of Holocaust survivors and assumes that children "tend so suffer – less outspokenly – from some of the symptoms that affect their parents" (674), even if their parents deal with their own traumatic past by denying it (Bohleber, "Trauma" 6). A number of different terms have been coined to describe how "subjects are haunted by tragedies affecting their parents, grandparents, or ancestors from far back without conscious knowledge" (Kaplan 106). Abraham and Torok, for example, speak of a haunting "phantom" (Abraham; Torok), Huyssen speaks of "secondary Holocaust trauma" (*Present* 128), and Hirsch, "Generation" of "postmemory" (106). Caruth, too, assumes that trauma can be passed on from one person to another, and from one generation to the next, as Leys shows (284). I follow Kaplan, Volkan and others by using the term 'transgenerational trauma' since it emphasizes the fact that the generations following a collective traumatic event actually suffer from a trauma, too, while at the same time pointing to the origin of that trauma. Transgenerational trauma affects the children of trauma victims in multiple ways. Due to their primary traumatization parents can be unable to establish a loving relationship (Varvin 145) and might try to balance their feeling of unsafety by overprotecting their children (149-50). Traumatized parents also often transmit their feelings of guilt for having survived.<sup>115</sup> Consequently, children of survivors might suffer from symptoms "from depression,

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<sup>115</sup> Codde argues that the effect of transgenerational trauma only affects the second generation: "While the second generation can still be called traumatized, not by the Holocaust itself but by its after-effects (a retraumatization by traumatized parents), this is not the case for later generations whose psyches are not damaged by growing up in a dysfunctional family" ("Keeping" 675). I do not agree with this view, however, since, as Volkan, for example, convincingly argues with regard to traumatic historical events like the Holocaust, "If the children cannot deal with what is deposited in them, they, as adults, will in turn pass the mental representation of the event to the next generation" (88).

grumpiness, nightmares, and panic attacks based on irrational fears, to obsessive-compulsive behavior, overprotectiveness, emotional numbing, and feelings of guilt” (Codde, “Keeping” 674).

In *Great House*, Weisz’s traumatization influences his behavior towards his children. He is overprotective:

PARANOID THAT something might happen to his children, Weisz was strict about what they were allowed to do, where they were allowed to go, and with whom. Their lives were monitored by a series of humorless nannies . . . Any change or amendment to their daily schedule had to be first run by their father. (120, also 121)

Isabel compares Weisz’s treatment of his children, which has to be interpreted as a reaction to the traumatic loss of his parents and feelings of constant insecurity, to detention: “They were prisoners of their father’s, locked within the walls of their own family” (113). The transmission of Weisz’s loss of the basic sense of trust (*Urvertrauen*) to his children also finds expression in his remark that he “taught them to trust no one but themselves” (287). Bohleber points out that the relationship between parents and children who are linked by a transmission of trauma has often a symbiotic character which renders it almost impossible for the children to assert their autonomy without putting into danger the familial equilibrium (“Entwicklung” 816). In *Great House*, Isabel senses these processes in the relationship between Weisz and his children:

It was bad enough that he cowed his own children into such pathetic position, rendering them unable to strike out their own lives. Bad enough that he had succeeded in coercing them into a form of confinement of his own design, a condition they didn’t resist because it was not within the realm of possibility for them to refuse their father. He ruled over them not with an iron fist or a temper, but rather with the unspoken threat, much more haunting, of the consequences of the slightest discord. (164-65)

The reader learns here that Weisz has raised his children in a climate of obedience which precludes any form of striving for independence from their part.<sup>116</sup>

The fact that Weisz’s trauma is transmitted to the subsequent generation arises from the way in which Leah reacted as a child to the furniture her father bought and sold: “Leah remembered the arrival of certain of these long-lost pieces . . ., tense and somber events that had terrified her so much that as a small child she would sometimes hide in the kitchen when

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<sup>116</sup> For other examples of Yoav’s obedience and of how the expectations of her father and his demands of loyalty influence Leah’s life see Krauss (*Great* 164).

the crates were pried open, in case what popped out were the blackened faces of her dead grandparents" (115). Leah is afraid of the furniture whose significance for her father she can hardly grasp. She merely understands that it has to do with her dead grandparents who apparently haunt the present of the family. For Leah's brother, too, the furniture has a haunting, scary quality. When he is twelve, he has

a reoccurring dream that his father, his sister, and he lived together on a wooded shore and every night the tide would wash furniture onto the beach, four poster beds and sofas dressed with seaweed. . . . The dreams were sad and eerie (119).

Being haunted is a typical symbol of trauma and transgenerational trauma (e.g. Kaplan 106; Abraham 173). In *Great House*, the second generation of Holocaust survivors is haunted by the ghosts of their murdered grandparents, by the furniture symbolizing their death, and by their father's expectations. The siblings' behavior after the visits from their father also testifies to their secondary traumatization: "Yoav often seemed remote and listless, and Leah disappeared for long, punishing hours of practice" (142). Displaying two of the symptoms of transgenerational trauma Codde listed, Yoav thus falls in a depression-like state and Leah turns to a kind of obsessive-compulsive behavior. Moreover, Krauss's novel suggests that Weisz transmitted his survivor's guilt to his children. There are several hints in the novel that Weisz triggers a need to punish themselves in the siblings (118). This need shows above all in the siblings' response to their father's suicide, which originates from his Holocaust trauma: Their father's sense of duty had already before his suicide "commanded" their lives (115, also 162), but after their father's death they are so full of guilt (118) that they adopt Weisz's survivor's guilt and ban all joys from their life (118), "stopped living" (116).<sup>117</sup> Weisz's suicide can thus be seen as the culmination of the transgenerational transmission of trauma: Leah interprets the suicide as "*a way to make it impossible for us ever to escape him*" (116; emphasis in original).

In her depiction of Leah and Yoav Weisz and their relationship to their father, Krauss hence adopts many accepted symptoms of the transgenerational transmission of trauma.

Another form of indirect traumatization is vicarious trauma. Varsky's disappearance causes at least one instance of what Kaplan calls "vicarious or secondary trauma" (39). The in Psychology accepted medical condition of vicarious traumatization assumes that people

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<sup>117</sup> Huyssen traces a similar transfer of survivor's guilt to the following generation in Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (Huyssen 128).

working with victims of direct traumatization, like social workers and therapists, for example, “may experience painful images of what happened to the patient and imagine the same thing happening to themselves” (Kaplan 40). The same process can take place when non-professionals have close contact to the traumatized. This phenomenon can manifest itself in a number of symptoms similar to those of direct traumatization, like nightmares, irritability, social withdrawal, depression, heavy breathing, and heart rate acceleration (40-41). Dominick LaCapra, “Trauma” insists in this context on the difference between “empathic unsettlement” which he considers desirable, and vicarious traumatization, which he excoriates as vicarious victimhood:

It is dubious to identify with the victim to the point of making oneself a surrogate victim who has a right to the victim's voice or subject-position. The role of empathy and empathic unsettlement in the attentive secondary witness does not entail this identity; it involves a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other's position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other's place (722).

I use Kaplan’s term here because, in her definition, it also includes the possibility of a transfer of traumatic effects via media (Kaplan 87), which will be of significance in the following, and because in her definition vicarious traumatization does not mean taking over the position of the original victim.

In *Great House*, the effects of vicarious trauma can be traced in Nadia. Although her relationship to Varsky consisted mainly of the postcards he sent her for two years after he had left for Chile, she is severely marked by the news of his violent death and suffers whenever she is reminded of him. She has nightmares about the things his torturers possibly did to him (Krauss, *Great* 13, 35, 204). In this case, the traumatization is caused, or at least intensified, by the information Nadia receives via the media about the tortures taking place in Chile (13). She even falls into a depressive state, is unable to write (20, 36, 204) and “the sight of the desk every morning made [her] want to cry” (204). After Leah’s visit and the subsequent loss of Varsky’s desk, Nadia also experiences panic attacks, the symptoms of which, like heart racing, labored breathing, anxiety, social withdrawal (41), match the symptoms of vicarious trauma quoted above. Moreover, Varsky’s ghost returns to haunt her, first in a metaphorical sense after Nadia found out about his disappearance: “I became haunted by Daniel Varsky and had difficulty concentrating. My mind would wander back to the night I met him” (203). In the following, Varsky returns twice “in disguise”: first, when Nadia recognizes a – naturally impossible – physical resemblance between Leah and Varsky (21), and for a second time when

Nadia meets the young Israeli Adam who, according to her, resembles Varsky (215-17). In the second instance, Nadia even calls Adam in terminology typical of haunting “the ghost of Daniel Varsky” (219). Just like a direct trauma, the insidious trauma of Varsky’s persecution and murder haunts Nadia and intrudes into her life.

Krauss hence adopts two concepts which derived from the original psychologic concept of trauma to account for symptoms that resemble those of PTSD but are found in individuals not directly affected by traumatic events. A special case is Lotte’s suffering after finding about Varsky’s disappearance and death: “Tortured first and then killed, she said, and as her voice slid over those nightmarish last words it didn’t catch in her throat or contract to hold back tears, but rather expanded, the way pupils do in the dark, as if it contained not one nightmare but many” (104). In Lotte’s case, I would argue that the fate of Varsky does not traumatize her but reinforces her existing traumatization by reawakening memories and insecurities about her family’s fate, and confirming her trauma caused loss of trust in safety since such atrocious deeds can and do happen again.

#### **6.4. *Great House*: An Unacknowledged Holocaust Novel?**

##### **Telling the Traumatic Experience**

As I have shown, Krauss attributes classic trauma symptoms to her characters and applies several classic trauma concepts. Also the narrative style of *Great House* characterizes it as a trauma novel.

Its fragmented and non-chronological narrative caters to the call for a narrative form that reflects the traumatization of its characters and the specific working of traumatic memory. The narratives leap back and forth in time and hardly ever give specific dates. In none of the plot lines, it is explicitly stated when the narration of events takes place. Only in retrospective, when all narrators have “finished” their story, the reader knows that the time frame of the novel spans the years from Lotte’s birth in 1921 to the moment when Isabel tells her story in 2008. In between, there are hubs in which a high number of important events from several plot lines take place. These hubs underline the novel’s concern with trauma. The first of these hubs is constituted by the World War II years and their aftermath, that is the years from 1939 to 1949. During this time span, Lotte comes to London as chaperon of a *kindertransport* thus escaping her probable death in a Nazi extermination camp. In 1944, the Gestapo arrests George Weisz’s family in Budapest and his father dies on the subsequent death march. In 1948, Lotte gives her

baby away, and Aaron fights in the 1948 Palestine War. This time hub ends with the year in which Arthur Bender meets Lotte and George Weisz leaves Hungary and arrives in Israel. The events of these ten years thus circle mainly around three subjects: the experience of Nazi persecution, war, and the foundation of Israel.

The second time hub centers on Daniel Varsky's appearances and disappearance and thus the symbol of the military dictatorship in Chile. Probably in November 1970, Daniel Varsky's visits Lotte as the inscription in Lotte's book, which Nadia found in the desk, suggests. In 1972, the first events from Nadia's narrative take place: she and her boyfriend R break up and, subsequently, she meets Daniel Varsky to procure furniture for her empty apartment. The hub ends with the year 1974 in which Daniel Varsky disappears and Lotte is devastated when finding out about his fate.

The third time hub covers the years from 1995 to 1999. The first event of this hub is Lotte's reporting her crime, that is giving away her child, to a magistrate. The exact date of this event is not given but it must have taken place either in 1995 or in 1996. 1997, the year in which Lotte dies, is followed by the year in which Isabel meets Yoav and moves in with the siblings. Moreover, the seizure of Pinochet in London on October 16 of the same year reminds Arthur of Daniel Varsky and subsequently motivates him to look for Lotte's child. In 1999, Yoav and Isabel go to Belgium to retrieve an antique chess table for Weisz, Weisz visits Arthur on behalf of the desk, and Leah contacts Nadia and picks up the desk in New York. Between March and June of the same year, Isabel leaves for the USA to take care of her mother, Nadia visits Weisz in his house in Jerusalem looking for Leah, Weisz goes to New York to look for the desk, Aaron's wife dies and Nadia runs Dovik over. In June, Weisz commits suicide in Jerusalem and his children return to Israel to withdraw from life. The third time hub could be subsumed under the heading 'the return of the suppressed traumatic memories'. The memory of the baby she gave away returns with force to Lotte's mind, weakened by the Alzheimer's disease, and urges her to confess her "crime". The arrest of Pinochet triggers in Arthur the memory of Daniel Varsky, which in turn prompts him to face the part of his wife's past that deeply shocked him by meeting the adoptive mother of Lotte's child. While in Nadia's story the ghost of Daniel Varsky returns to haunt her stay in Israel, Aaron has to confront death and the problematic relationship to his son. Finally, yet importantly, the return of the desk, which embodies the loss of his father, into Weisz's life leads to his suicide.

After the last time hub, there is a time leap of seven years. In 2005 Isabel receives a letter from Leah. In the letter, Leah explains that they disappeared because their father committed suicide and asks Isabel to come to Jerusalem to rescue Yoav from his isolation. In 2008, Isabel narrates her part of the story.

Next to fragmented and non-chronological narrative the novel makes use of first-person narrative to underline the traumatization of the characters. There are five first-person narrators in the novel: Nadia, Aaron, Arthur, Isabel, and George Weisz. The chapters told by Nadia and Aaron explicitly address someone who turns out to be the same person (Dovik), even though the identity of the person they address remains unclear for some time. Arthur's chapters seem to be addressed to someone, too, but there are rarely any direct forms of address; they are directed at a "you" which appears above all in infrequent questions which can be classified as rhetorical, such as "Can you understand what it was like?" (Krauss, *Great* 267). Especially in conjunction with the fragmented and non-chronologic narrative, this representational choice can be considered as, first, typical of oral reports of past events. Second, this type of narration can also be explained by the attempt to express traumatic memories since "repetitions, the constant return to past arguments, and the waving in and out of positions" are, according to Kaplan's text analyses (44-45), typical markers of trauma, or, as Weisel-Barth puts it: "The ragged and tenuous connections between the stories reflect the splintered nature of the characters' traumatic lives" (3). Third, first-person narratives, especially if dealing with the Holocaust, have to be seen in the tradition of testimony literature, an aspect underlined by Nadia's addressing her story to a judge, and also as broaching the issue of the need for, what is often termed, empathic listeners or witnesses. The recurring theme of writing and writer's blocks should be considered as expressing the characters' need to tell their story despite their difficulties to express their feelings: Aaron struggles with a letter to his dead wife, Nadia describes several instances in which she was unable to write, Lotte writes about "the nightmarish parts of her past" even if "many times metamorphosed into other forms" (Krauss, *Great* 246), and Dovik gave up writing when he was sent to war. The acts of writing depicted in *Great House* are thus mostly triggered or interrupted by intrusions of traumatic events into the life of the characters. Moreover, the characters "[compose] strange tales which seek to confront and alleviate evil and suffering," like Dovik's shark story, for instance (Berger and Milbauer 78). Concerning Lotte's writing the reader learns that "no matter how bleak or tragic her stories were, their effort, their creation, could only ever be a form of hope, a denial of death

or a howl of life in the face of it" (Krauss, *Great* 256). I agree then with Berger and Milbauer's conclusion that "Arthur's description of the reason Lotte kept writing addresses both the hope and the necessity of bearing witness through the act of writing" (81). The way in which the difficulties in and the benefits of writing are presented in the novel offers a meta-narrative reflecting on the role of autobiographical story telling in dealing with and transmitting traumatic memories. Fourth, the need to share traumatic histories with others also ties in with one of the major topics of *Great House*, namely the question of what is transmitted from one generation to the next. Arthur's, Aaron's and Weisz's accounts explicitly explain their narrators' thoughts and motives in past actions thereby passing on knowledge and memories of events important in history and/or in particular for their family. This becomes especially clear in Aaron's story, which was apparently triggered by the narrator's approaching death (174)<sup>118</sup>. In the introductory words to his musings about his past, death and their relationship, Aaron repeatedly addresses his son Dovik directly:

Listen. I have a proposal for you. . . . What would you say to a temporary truce, for as long as it takes for you to say your piece and me to say mine? (174)

Let me begin. You see, my child, a little bit every day I find myself contemplating my death. (175)

Wait, Dovik. Don't go. Remember how I used to put you to sleep at night, always you wanted one more question? (198)

The cited text passages not only address Dovik directly but also express the narrator's urgent need to "say his piece," to give testimony, before he dies. It is also above all in the chapters narrated from Aaron's point of view that the author hints at the transgenerational transmission of behavior patterns. When Aaron relates to Dovik that he and his father "didn't speak of personal things" (194), this might be seen as an explanation for Aaron's difficulties in connecting to Dovik.

The choice of first-person narrative connects all plot lines and underlines, especially by often including an explicit addressee, how (traumatic) memories, in form of testimonials, are passed on from one generation to the next via story telling. It also emphasizes the need to tell and the need for an empathic listener, especially after trauma, in order to make sense of past events. The first-person narrative seems to impose itself on a text dealing with the transgenerational transmission of trauma and written by a third generation writer since "the

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<sup>118</sup> Aaron claims: "Death is waiting just around the corner for me" (Krauss, *Great* 174).

struggle . . . lies in crossing not one but two gaps, that of experience and that of memory” (Lang 49) which is only possible by recurring to eyewitness accounts that are passed on.

Finally, on the level of content, the chapter titles accentuate in different ways *Great House’s* preoccupation with telling the traumatic experience to an emphatic listener and/or subsequent generations. The titles of Nadia’s chapters (“All rise”), for example, refer to the profession of the judge Nadia ran over and to whom she tells her story whilst sitting with him in the hospital. In this context, the title clearly underlines the confessional stance Nadia adopts in her tale.

The meaning of “True Kindness” as title of Aaron’s chapters remains for a long time unclear. The anecdotes Aaron recalls from Dovik’s childhood and youth never depict him as a kind father but rather as stern, emotionally distant or even cruel. Only at the end of the second chapter under this title, Aaron remembers an episode that explains that “True Kindness” is the name of a religious organization whose members take care of the victims of violent assaults, after a bomb attack, for example. The name of the organization apparently derives from the much-debated philosophical and religious concept of true kindness, which considers an act as truly kind if it is performed without the expectation, or even possibility, of receiving something in return. The name of the organization thus makes sense, since, as Aaron tells the reader, “the dead cannot repay the favor” (Krauss, *Great* 198). The title references the ongoing bloodshed in Israel and its traumatic consequences for the population. Aaron brings it up when he explains to the addressee / Dovik that, despite all their problems, he never gave up being his father and that he always talked to him in his mind (197). Especially after he witnessed the bombing of a bus and how the Orthodox organization True Kindness “[collected] the splattered dead” (197), he could not talk to anyone about it but to Dovik (198). This inability to speak is probably also linked to his war trauma, since the described bus scene echoes and re-activates what Aaron witnessed in the war. The title of these chapters hence brings up the terrorist activities taking place in Israel, Aaron’s war trauma, and the classic reaction of a traumatized witness of being unable to put the experience into words.

The chapters told by Arthur take their name from the ponds, or swimming holes, in which Lotte took a bath every day. Arthur’s rendition of Lotte’s baths illustrates that the swimming holes took on a metaphorical meaning for him. Whenever his wife dived in the obscure pond and disappeared for some seconds, he was deeply afraid of losing her, just as he was always scared of losing her to the dark secrets from her past to which she retreated from time to time

and which he could not fathom (77, 267). The “holes” thus symbolize what Arthur does not know about Lotte’s traumatic past because she is unable to talk about it, and therefore what he cannot understand about her behavior.

The title, “Lies Told by Children,” might refer to several instances depicted in the chapter in which children lie to their parents: Isabel lies to her parents about the progress of her doctoral thesis and her life in London (130). Leah tells her father lies about her alleged happy social life with many friends in London (162)(Krauss, Great Ć and about the desk, he sent her to obtain in New York. Yoav lies to his father about his relationship to Isabel and conceals her living with them from him (160-62). Especially the lies told to Weisz, which appear to be a reaction to his trauma-induced compulsion to control his children, have severe consequences since they lead to a big fight between Yoav and Isabel and in a way, to Weisz’s suicide and the sibling’s subsequent withdrawal from all human contact.

The chapter called “Weisz” is, as its name implies, about Yoav and Isabel’s father. In his first-person narrative, he moves back and forth between memories of his childhood, his return to Budapest after the war, his arrival in Israel and his travels after he left Israel after his wife’s death. He describes his business as antiques dealer as emanating “[out] of the ruins of history” (285), tells the reader about his father’s death in a death march (287) and recalls the disappointment and relief when he finally finds the desk (289)(Krauss, Great ģ. Written shortly before his suicide, this chapter presents the events of Weisz’s life which explain the meaning of the desk and his decision to kill himself. It thus exemplifies on very few pages how the loss of home and family due to Nazi persecution affects Weisz’s whole life and can thus be read as testimony.

### **Jewish American Literature**

Since *Great House* bears so many features of a classic trauma novel and broaches trauma in so many ways, it is surprising that reviews of the novel and interviews with the author hardly discuss it as a trauma novel. They mostly focus on the novel’s structure, the author’s motives for writing it, and memory or loss, not trauma, as a subject (e.g. the interviews with Nicole Krauss by Rachel Cooke, Bret Anthony Johnston, and Tom Legro, or the review by Rebecca Newberger Goldstein). Whereas the traumas the novel deal with naturally appear briefly in the summaries given of the novel, only Jennie Rothenberg Gritz talks with Krauss about *Great House* as a Holocaust novel – a label Krauss rejects insisting that what interests her “is the response to catastrophic loss”. The fact that the novel juxtaposes the Holocaust with wars

waged by Israel, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the military dictatorship in Chile figures in none of the reviews and interviews. Neither does it play a role in scholarly analyses of the novel. Despite Krauss' rejection of the category "Holocaust novel," the scholarly discussion of *Great House*, which is surprisingly scarce given that the novel was a finalist of the 2010 National Book Award for Fiction, focuses mainly on its treatment of the Holocaust. Antonia Strakosch analyzes it as model for third-generation Holocaust fiction, Berger and Milbauer call it a "paradigmatic third-generation [representation] of inheriting the Holocaust trauma" (64).

Third-generation Holocaust writing is a subgenre of Jewish American Literature. As with most literatures, critics and writers disagree about the definition of what constitutes Jewish American literature. Nonetheless, or even because of the controversy, manifold attempts exist to carve out similarities in subject and style, for instance by Codde (*Jewish*), Grauer, Gubar, Wirth-Nesher and Kramer. *Great House* blends in with almost all of the tentative definitions of Jewish American literature undertaken and cited by the aforementioned authors: It was written by a US-American Jew (Codde, *Jewish* 7; Grauer 270), most characters are Jewish and identify themselves as such (Codde, *Jewish* 6–7), it refers to sacred Hebrew writings (Wirth-Nesher and Kramer, "Introduction" 3), and deals with typical themes, such as the Holocaust and identity (Grauer 270; Gubar 232). Critics like Grauer and Gubar consider identity and its constructedness a major subject of Jewish American writing. This characteristic is usually coexistent with Jewish American literature's concern with the connection between and the mutual impact of identity and narrative (Grauer 270-2, 281). *Great House* is to be seen in this literary tradition, especially because of those passages which interrelate Nadia's successes and failures in writing as well as her need to tell her story to her lifelong struggle to come to terms with her feelings of chosenness and self-loathing (Krauss, *Great* 201, 206). In *Great House*, the first-person narrative "underscores postmodernism's fragmentation and feelings of exile" (Berger and Milbauer 83). Especially Nadia's story, but also George Weisz's immigration to Israel are examples of another typical element of Jewish American writing that is linked to the construction of identity, namely the "journey to Israel . . . as a kind of initiatory ritual . . . , as a spiritual quest . . . , or as a way to externalize the exploration of the unknown space of the self by grafting it onto actual territory" (Grauer 278). This geographical move is often spurred by the idea that Israel is a place where "the familiar American trope of individual self-invention" (278) can be achieved and thus ties in with questions of identity.

### The Juxtaposition of Traumas in Third-Generation Holocaust Writing

Besides its preoccupation with characteristic themes of Jewish American literature, Krauss' novel should also, and more importantly, be considered in the tradition of what Gubar argues to be a special concern of Jewish American women writers: "Despite the insistence of Holocaust scholars that the disaster must not, cannot be compared to any other, that it stands unrepresentable, outside of history, women artists have insisted on the ethical necessity of such (albeit provisional, inadequate) comparisons" (Gubar 247). Even though Gubar's argument is based solely on works examining the similarities between "the situation of Blacks and Jews" (236) in the United States, Krauss' novel with its juxtaposition of the traumas of war, Holocaust and dictatorship can join the ranks of this strand of literature, or at least the part of it which came into being "during the last decades of the twentieth century" (235) and dealt with the "sometimes matching, sometimes clashing instances of *traumatic experience*" (236; my emphasis) of the Holocaust and American racism. In her article on the predecessor of *Great House*, *The History of Love*, Jessica Lang argues along the same lines as Gubar but applies a different label which recalls the classifications by Strakosch and Berger and Milbauer: according to Lang, Krauss' work belongs to a subcategory of Holocaust fiction which she calls "third generation Holocaust writers" and which originated in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (45-46). Strakosch, Lang, Berger and Milbauer all agree that the transgenerational transmission of (Holocaust) memory is an important subject for this generation of writers. Even though authors like Krauss "cannot write [their] ancestors' stories the way survivors or their children have written about the Shoa" (Berger and Milbauer 64) due to the lack of direct access, "the impact of the Holocaust continues to resound" (65). According to Lang, since writers of the third post-Holocaust generation have no direct experience of the Holocaust and, in contrast to second generation authors, are further removed from the eyewitnesses of the events, that is the generation of their grandparents, "the representation of the Holocaust becomes indirect rather than direct"<sup>119</sup> (46) in their works. Similarly, Strakosch reads *Great House* as expression of the author's attempt to deal with the distant yet influential events of the Holocaust, and consequently assumes narrative techniques which produce distance to be typical of third-generation Holocaust writing (175, 177). While Strakosch finds distance to be

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<sup>119</sup> For an analysis of this phenomenon with regard to Jacques Derrida's concept of traces see Codde ("Keeping").

the major, and sole, characteristic of third-generation Holocaust writing, Lang argues that the Holocaust is “balanced by other, also important, histories” (46). Lang’s definition thus works not only for *The History of Love* but also for *Great House* since there are no direct representations of the Holocaust and other (traumatic) histories, such as the military dictatorship in Chile, play an important role. In view of Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, a novel by a male author dealing with the Holocaust and several other traumatic historical events, Gubar’s attribution of the juxtaposition of traumas to women writers appears outdated. Nonetheless, *Great House* has to be seen in line with the literary strand Gubar carved out which has turned into an approach applied by third-generation writers of both sexes. With regard to the difficult search for contemporary US-American novels dealing with several historical traumas, I would argue, however, that this is still a marginal strand, even among this group of writers.

How Krauss approaches the problem of juxtaposing other collective historical traumas with the Holocaust, and which traumas she deems comparable, is the subject of the following chapter.

### **6.5. Connections between Traumas in *Great House*: A Critical Tour de Force of Trauma Representation**

A shark as repository for human sadness. Who takes all that the dreamers cannot bear, who bears the violence of their accumulated feeling. (Krauss, *Great* 179)

*Great House* presents collective historical, individual and transmitted trauma eloquently and complexly. Krauss’ use of different trauma concepts and the way they are applied in the novel arguably confirm Gibbs’ suspicion that *Great House* is one of the novels which “seem at the very least calculated to cater for a readership now well versed in the formal aesthetic of trauma literature” (Gibbs 38). I agree – to phrase it more positively – that the author knows well the literary and psychologic trauma discourses and applies them for her ends. I would also argue that this knowledge and the fact that *Great House* was published last of the novels I analyze in this study – meaning that the author probably at least the novels by Foer and McCann – show in the way connections between traumas are established in the novel. Krauss’s novel presents itself as a tour de force of trauma concepts, literary strategies, and comments on the expectations of the classic trauma discourse, thus continuing and expanding Campbell’s approach.

### 6.5.1. Literary Strategies for Connecting Traumas

In *Great House*, the author applies different literary strategies to connect the traumas from which the characters suffer, but in contrast to *What You Owe Me*, there are hardly any direct comparisons or juxtapositions to be found. Reflecting the complexity of the novel, trauma is often symbolized and connections between the collective historical traumas are only hinted at.

#### Recurring Characters

One literary strategy of connection, and of connecting their traumas, is the inclusion of recurring characters. Dovik's and Leah's presence in two of the plots is a means to link the stories, or, as in Leah's case, to propel the movement of the desk. The same holds true for Weisz' recurring appearances in all but Aaron's chapters, which echo the movement of the desk and links the stories. The character of Daniel Varsky embodies trauma in manifold forms, and because of his movement between the plot lines, he constitutes a major link between traumas. For Lotte, Arthur and Nadia, Varsky symbolizes the atrocities of Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile. Due to his age, the Chilean embodies for Lotte also the child she gave away (Krauss, *Great* 251), hence another traumatic loss of a family member next to the loss of her parents and siblings. Furthermore, I agree with Berger and Milbauer that

[t]he poet's fate brings to mind not only the murder of countless young Jewish writers and intellectuals in the Holocaust whose untimely and horrific deaths deprived the world of undreamed of possibilities, but also underscores the fact that genocide and genociders are very much a part of the contemporary landscape (77).

For Lotte, part of the shock when being informed about Varsky's disappearance is certainly due to the realization that – against the international community's often-cited vow of “Never again” – the Nazi's methods of prosecution recur only 30 years later. Moreover, Varsky's fate probably reminds Lotte not only of the Nazis' murder of “young Jewish writers” but also of her feelings of agonizing uncertainty about the fate of her parents. Consequently, Varsky is a symbol not only of the historical trauma of the military dictatorship in Chile but also points to the similarities with the Holocaust, thus connecting the two historical traumas.

Apart from symbolizing different historical traumas and indicating some of their structural similarities, Varsky also connects Lotte's Holocaust trauma, Nadia's vicarious trauma, Leah's transgenerational trauma and – as temporary owner of the desk – Weisz's trauma by becoming a haunting presence in all the plotlines. In chronological order, Varsky first appears

in Arthur's narrative meeting Lotte in London, then in Nadia's giving her his furniture in New York, then as ghost in guise of the young Israeli Adam in Nadia's again, and, finally in Arthur's account when Weisz visits him about the desk. It is important to note that Varsky turns from a character with agency in the first part of the novel into a haunting specter in the second part set after his death. One could argue that, as a victim of a historical trauma, he embodies the capacity of traumatic memories to haunt contemporary and following generations, and that Varsky thus also symbolizes the way in which traumatic memories can be passed on across time and space.

### Recurring Symbols

In *Great House*, traumas are not only connected by a recurring character but also by the two main recurring symbols of the desk and the house.

The desk, intricately connected to Varsky and to Weisz, is a major symbol of and link between traumas in *Great House*. It symbolizes trauma in different ways: first, for different characters it stands for different collective historical traumas. For Nadia, the desk "embodied the violent fate of [her] friend [Varsky]" (Krauss, *Great* 204) Varsky, and therefore the (vicarious) trauma of military dictatorship in Chile. Since for Weisz the desk symbolizes his father, who was killed by the Nazis, also for his children the desk embodies the death of their grandparents in the Holocaust. The meaning of the desk for Lotte is, naturally, only deducible from Arthur's point of view but there are several hints in the novel that the desk symbolizes unpleasant memories which cannot be shrugged off. The way in which the desk is introduced into Arthur's narrative suggests that it is linked to Lotte's traumatic Holocaust memories in some way since it "overshadowed everything else like some sort of grotesque, threatening monster" (83) just like the traumatic experiences overshadow Lotte's whole life. Arthur describes the desk furthermore as "foreboding" (248), "monstrous" (103, 251) and looming above people or other pieces of furniture (248, 277, 278). The desk is associated with the Second World War and the Holocaust by the description of the view from Lotte's room which follows the description of the desk's menacing presence:

The other side of the street had been bombed, and from her window you could see the piles of rubble . . . , and here and there was the shell of a house whose empty windows framed the sky. . . . Many times I saw Lotte staring at those ruins with their solitary chimneys (83).

The description of the view refers to the Nazi bombing of London and makes use of what Kligerman terms “emblematic images of the Final Solution” (169) typical of second generation Holocaust narratives: The “solitary chimneys” (Krauss, *Great* 83) in the bombed street recall the chimneys of the Nazi extermination camps. In Arthur’s account, the desk is associated with darkness (83, 86, 248) and “death that invaded every corner” (278; see also 225, 248). Since Arthur believes that Lotte received the desk from a former lover and that she cleaved to it for so long since the donor is also the father of the child she gave away, the desk also symbolizes Lotte’s lost child. According to Arthur, the desk is like a punishment for her, “[a]ll those years she had borne it as she had borne her guilt” (251). Giving the desk to Varsky, who reminds her of her own son, is an attempt at overcoming the guilt associated with it. Since the loss of the child is linked to Lotte’s traumatic past, the desk’s power as a symbol of the Holocaust is reinforced. Strakosch’s argument that the desk’s “menacing power over the characters stems directly from the trauma of the Holocaust” (180) holds thus true for all characters into whose lives the desk enters apart from Nadia, who remains ignorant of its Nazi past. Being a symbol of the Holocaust and the military dictatorship in Chile, the desk thus suggests a connection between the respective traumatic experiences or, at least, encourages a parallel examination of them.

Second, the desk symbolizes trauma in general. Because of its movement and unanticipated appearances, it underlines the common trait of traumatic memories to intrude into the lives of people. Psychologist Joye Weisel-Barth gives an explanation of the desk’s function for Weisz which can be transferred to the desk’s meaning as a symbol of trauma in the whole novel. She argues convincingly that the desk has become a fetish for Weisz because of his traumatization. According to her, personal fetishes “develop psychologically in response to trauma and unbearable anxiety”, they “are used by both men and women to allay and regulate . . . all sorts of relational, cultural, and personally mortal horrors”, they “form and calcify because of the absence or failure of potentially reparative relationships” (5) and because of a “distrust of the physical and emotional surround” (10). Weisz’s depiction in the novel hence suggests that he has a prototypical disposition for developing a fetish because of his trauma and his trauma-induced loss of trust and inability to build sound relationships. Weisel-Barth argues also that Weisz’s fetish evolved as a defensive strategy, that it allowed for “a turning away from his . . . grief toward an attachment to some enticing and enlivening material object” (2-3) in the aftermath of his traumatic loss of home and family brought about by the Nazis. This

interpretation is supported by Weisz's own explanation of the meaning the pieces of furniture have for his clients: "I produce the object they have been dreaming of for half a lifetime, that they have invested with the weight of their longing" (Krauss, *Great* 275). It can thus be deduced that for Weisz, too, the desk is the object of his "longing" if not of his obsession. For Weisz, the desk is at the same time a symbol of his loss and incorporates the "promise of restoration and redemption" (Weisel-Barth 21) to be achieved when his father's study is finally completely rebuilt. It therefore motivates all his doings, like his choice to become an antiques dealer, his journeys around the world, and his order that Leah travel to New York and pretend to be Varsky's daughter. In her review of Freud's findings on fetishes, Weisel-Barth offers a summary of the role of the fetish in the life of traumatized people, which explains Weisz's behavior throughout the novel: "people with fetishes are lifeless; the cost of their investing life energy in the fetish object is dissociation and emotional deadness in the 'real life' present. In addition, all sense of agency is submerged in the power of the fetish" (8). It is thus not accidental that Weisz invests a lot, if not all, of his time and energy in finding the desk, or, as he puts it: "I traveled from city to city, I made inquiries, I called, I knocked on doors, I scoured every conceivable source" (Krauss, *Great* 276). The quotation from Weisel-Barth also highlights the connection between trauma and the personal fetish which apparently both contribute to Weisz's apparent lifelessness – Isabel describes him as "cold" (Krauss, *Great* 160) and "bloodless" (Krauss, *Great* 163), for example – and his losing contact to the present and living ever more in the past (Krauss, *Great* 276). Weisel-Barth's analysis of the desk as a personal fetish also produces a psychological explanation for Weisz's suicide, which occurs after he finally found the desk:

the desk, for fifty years a seductive and demonic object that has possessed Weisz' fantasy life with fetishistic power. In the moment that it comes into physical reality, the illusion shatters, and the desk becomes merely an inanimate thing, 'mute and uncomprehending.' . . . [W]e are invited to conclude that without the fetish, his life becomes unbearable and meaningless. (22)

Weisel-Barth argues that the acquisition of the fetishized object deprives Weisz of all reasons to live. Filling the "void", as Weisz terms it (Krauss, *Great* 275), means that the structuring principle in life as well as the illusion that the fetish will make the life of the traumatized whole again is destroyed, which creates a feeling of "disappointment" in Weisz, and also his clients (288). Moreover, Weisz's personal fetish is characterized as "a persecutory instrument that haunts his life" (Weisel-Barth 21) thereby tying it to the above discussed concept of haunting

which constitutes a significant aspect of trauma theory. In the novel, Weisz himself complains in the conversation with Arthur about being plagued by the client for whom he is allegedly looking for the desk: “You can’t imagine how he hounds me, Mr. Bender. . . . How he torments me” (Krauss, *Great* 276). Since the reader knows that Weisz wants the desk for himself, it is presumably the desk that haunts him, or the obligation he feels to find it, respectively.

Weisz is not the only character haunted by the desk. Most of the main characters in the novel are – or become – aware of the significance of the desk and its capacity to haunt. In the conversation with Weisz cited above, Arthur, for example, feels at unease because he has to tell Weisz “that the desk that had haunted us both was long gone” (277). In another instance, he calls the desk a “specter” (83). When, despite Lotte’s relocation from London to Oxford and back to London, the huge desk keeps “following” her, Arthur compares it to a “Trojan horse” (86), which I would read as a metaphor for its ability to intrude – like the memories it embodies – into his and Lotte’s life covertly and unwantedly. Isabel, who grew up being afraid of damaging the valuable furniture her parents inherited from her grandfather, also senses its symbolical meaning. When she finds out about Weisz’s profession, she realizes that, as a child, “[h]ad I known that the likes of George Weisz existed he would have haunted my sleep, as would the idea of the family furniture being carted off one piece at a time” (138). Here again, “haunting” as well as the allusion to nightmares are connected to the loss of or the searching for lost pieces of furniture. For Nadia, the desk is a constant companion who “had lain for all these years on [her] conscience” (217), and in a compulsive urge recalling Weisz’s fetishization of the desk, she feels the need to travel to Jerusalem, “not to claim the desk” (45) as she tells her therapist, but because she wants to see it (221). By constantly reappearing, the desk symbolizes the traumatic memories that keep intruding into the lives of the characters. Its capacity to haunt furthermore underlines that all traumas of the novel haunt their victims and those related to them.

Since the desk haunts not only those who own or used to own it but also their friends and relatives, it binds the traumas it symbolizes to each other by emphasizing that they can be passed on and do not only concern their direct victims. Originally a part of Weisz’s father’s study in Budapest, the desk is then given to Lotte by the father of her child. Lotte, in turn, bestows it on Varsky who lends it to Nadia from whom Leah retrieves it. In a prophetic passage close to the end of the novel, Weisz predicts that Leah will pass on the key to the storage room, and thus the desk, to Yoav’s child, yet another generation (289). Krauss considers the transmission

(of memories) from one generation to the next one of the overarching themes of *Great House* (Krauss, "Conversation"). According to Berger and Milbauer, "[exploring] [the desk's] journey allows Krauss to probe closely the survivors' and their offspring's 'responses to catastrophic loss' and suggests ways to transcend these losses and 'start a second life,' albeit in the shadows of the Holocaust" (69). Berger and Milbauer's analysis summarizes the meanings of the desk as a piece of furniture inherited from family or friends but at the same time connected to the, what I would term, traumatic loss of its former owner, as in the example of Weisz's loss of his father. Also, the desk's capacity to loom over the life of its current owner is a valid point. However, Berger and Milbauer completely disregard that it is not always and solely the Holocaust which, embodied by the desk, overshadows the life of the characters. In contrast, the desk is such a valuable symbol and works so well in connecting traumatic histories because of its ambiguity: for Nadia it symbolizes the Chilean dictatorship, for Arthur it stands for Lotte's unmentionable past, for Lotte it seems to be connected to the loss of her child and to the loss of her family in the Holocaust, for Weisz it symbolizes World War II and Holocaust experiences, for Leah it is an ungraspable icon from her father's past on which her whole life seems to be centered. From this list it becomes clear that what is passed down is essential in the construction of the identity of the characters, "the memory of trauma and its ineluctable relationship to identity" (Berger and Milbauer 72) is then another theme conveyed by the desk.

The second major recurring symbol in *Great House* is the house. Belsize Park (the Weisz's house in London), Lotte's and Arthur's house in London, the Weisz's house in Jerusalem as well as Aaron's house in Israel all play important roles in the novel. Nadia does not live in a house but in an apartment, which however fulfills mainly the same symbolic functions as the houses of the other characters. Like the other links between traumas discussed so far, the symbol of the house is ambiguous. The house is of course a symbol of home. To cite just three examples, Aaron speaks of his house as follows:

We stood in the hall of the house that had once been all of our house, a house that had been filled with life, every last room of it brimming with laughter, arguments, tears, dust, the smell of food, pain, desire, anger, and silence, too, the tightly coiled silence of people pressed up against each other in what is called a family (Krauss, *Great* 68).

Weisz states, with regard to the house in Budapest, even though it was dirty and in pieces on his return after the war: "never had it been more my home" (285). After falling in love with a man, Arthur's and Weisz's wives fall in love with a house (87, 145, 284). In *Great House*, this symbolic meaning of the house as family home is extended to the house as haven in times of

distress. From its very first page, the novel is populated by characters who refuse to leave their house: after the breakup with her boyfriend, Nadia “didn’t go out . . . and . . . didn’t let anybody come to see [her], either” (3), after the funeral, Aaron and Dovik are “closed up together in this house” (73), after being abused by the father of his fellow soldier, Dovik refuses to leave his room (188), and “[a]fter Leah’s trip to New York, and the beginning of the terrible silence between the siblings and their father, they stopped leaving the house altogether” (122). The siblings repeat this behavior after their father’s suicide, this time withdrawing to their family’s house in Jerusalem (116). The characters’ urge to retreat to a house is a strategy of coping with painful experiences – for instance, suicide, death in combat, loss of family – and thereby reconnects the symbol of the house to trauma. It is a place of retreat from a world prone to traumatic violence in which one can deal with one’s wounds. Weisz remembers an anecdote from his first years in Israel which supports this reading. He met an old man who “rarely left the room where he lived” and who told him: “I used to live a different life, in other countries. I met many people, and discovered that each had his own way to *cope with reality*” (287; my emphasis). For him as for many of *Great House*’s characters, staying at home is the preferred – or only possible – way of coping. For Lotte, the haven, in which she can cope, is not the whole house but her study in the attic. Arthur knows that is “a place to escape, even from me” (87; see also 256). Lotte obviously retreats from the “danger of daily life” (78) she senses and needs the privacy of the study “without which she wouldn’t have survived” (87).

The house as home plays also a significant role in the juxtaposition of the traumas of the persecution of the Jews by the Nazis and the expulsion of the Palestinians from Israel. Here, the ambiguity of the symbol becomes apparent: in Arthur’s first chapter, the reader is introduced to the idea that the house can also be a site of persecution and thus the contrary of a haven. Arthur reports that one of the “strange and often disturbing stories” (84) Lotte wrote was about a family moving into an empty house at war time, “oblivious to the horrific crimes of its former owner” (84). Arthur does not dwell on this story or explains it in any way. But since it was written by a Holocaust survivor, the horrific crimes were probably committed by Nazis against Jews. This brief text passage reinforces the comparison between the expulsion of the Palestinians from Israel and the Nazi persecution although it appears only once, in a short text passage near the end of the novel. Weisz remembers buying the house in Israel his wife fell in love with, and, right in the next text passage, his return to the ransacked house in Budapest after the war:

When I came here, he [the owner of the house] said, the floor was still littered with pistachio shells the Arab had eaten before he fled with his wife and children. Upstairs, I found the little girl's doll . . . with real hair that she had lovingly braided.

...

When I returned to the house in Budapest where I grew up, the War was over. The place was filthy. . . . On the floor of her ransacked closet, I found three strands of my mother's hair. (285)

In the quoted text passages, the author links the two historical traumas by putting them in physical proximity as well as by evoking an atmosphere of precipitous leave in both. The flight of a Palestinian family from its house in Jerusalem is juxtaposed to the Nazis' taking over the house of Weisz's family in Budapest. Moreover, by referring to "hair" in both text passages, a connection is established which reinforces the comparison of the expulsion of the Palestinians with Nazi practices since it is one of the "emblematic images of the Final Solution" suggested by Kligerman (169) that brings to mind the piles of hair discovered after the liberation of Auschwitz, for example. This comparison which suggests similarities between the Nazi course of action against Jews and that of the Jewish in Israel against Palestinians, is a decisive link between traumas because it is very controversial. Consequently, it is surprising that it did not figure in the reception of the novel – which might be because the author herself is the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, or because the comparison is only hinted at. Nonetheless, especially considered in unison with Lotte's story, this passage is a comment on the Israeli policy of eviction which cautions against the repetition of historic mistakes.

The study, as part of the house, is another recurring symbol linked to trauma in *Great House*. The studies of Lotte, Nadia, Weisz, and his father all play important roles. A central text passage, recounted by Isabel, indicates why the symbols of the house and the study need to be analyzed together and why they are intricately linked to trauma:

The house where I lived with them [Yoav and Leah] . . . was a twelve-minute walk from 20 Maresfield Gardens, the home of Dr. Sigmund Freud from September of 1938, after he fled the Gestapo, until the end of September 1939, when he died of three doses of morphine administered at his request. . . . When Freud fled Vienna almost all of his belongings were crated up and shipped to the new house in London, where his wife and daughter lovingly reassembled, down to the last possible detail, the study he'd been forced to abandon at 19 Berggasse. At the time I didn't know anything about Weisz's study in Jerusalem, and so the poetic symmetry of the house's nearness to Freud's was lost on me. Maybe all exiles try to re-create the place they've lost out of their fear of dying in a strange place. . . . I was often struck by the irony that Freud, who shed more light than anyone onto the crippling burden of memory, had been unable to resist its mythic spell any better than the rest of us. After he died, Anna Freud preserved the room exactly as her father left it . . . (110-11)

The geographical nearness of the siblings' house to Freud's exile house in London, and the way the latter is presented by Isabel offers a starting point for several comparisons, associations, and transfers of meaning. Weisz and Freud are both Jewish exiles who tried to rebuild what they were forced by the Nazis to leave behind in their original homes. In both cases, the reassembled rooms offer comfort for a very short time only: Freud's assisted suicide takes place after one year, Weisz's even after just a couple of months. Also in both cases, the children of the original owners of the study, namely Anna Freud and George Weisz, feel responsible for the preservation of what their parents left, or, to use Krauss's words, of what was "passed on" to them. The quoted text passage circling around the study thus puts another emphasis on transgenerational transmission. The fact that the house and the reassembled study belong to Freud, one of the forefathers of psychoanalysis' examination of trauma, highlights the significance of trauma for the novel. The negative impact of traumatic memories, transmitted or original, emerges not only from the two suicides they cause but also from their explicit designation as "crippling burden".<sup>120</sup> Isabel's musings on Freud's house end with a reference to a key meaning of the symbol of the house in the novel: "In the leaflet given out by an elderly docent who sits in a chair by the front door, the visitor is encouraged not only to consider her tour as one through an actual house, but also . . . as a tour through that metaphorical house, the mind" (111). The house as metaphor for the human mind is used in *Great House* to illustrate the psychic consequences of trauma on the mind of the traumatized. Arthur likens Lotte's mind to a house whose walls, erected to keep her past hidden behind them, Arthur must respect as borders so as not to endanger their relationship:

I who bowed to the borders drawn, the walls erected, the areas restricted, who turned away and never asked. . . . Who made a pact of ignorance and smothered what churned within so that things might carry on as they always had. So that the house would not flood, nor the walls come crashing down. So that we would not be invaded, crushed, or overcome by what dwelled in the silences around which we had so delicately, so ingeniously built a life. (Krauss, *Great* 281)

Another example of how the state of the house mirrors the characters' state of mind is the house of the Weisz family in Jerusalem. It "choked with flowering vines" and its "shutters were

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<sup>120</sup> For further thoughts on the impact of traumatic memories and Freud's ironic failure to follow his own advice see Berger and Milbauer who "contrast the positions of Sigmund Freud and Elie Wiesel concerning the role of memory. For Freud, memory was a 'crippling burden' which one must learn to work through in order to free oneself psychologically. For Wiesel, the Holocaust survivor, memory has vital ontological significance" (76).

always closed to keep out the punishing light" (110). This depiction reflects how Weisz and his children are slowly bereaved of life ("choked") by Weisz's traumatic memories and alludes to their inclination to withdraw from reality. Also the depiction of the Weisz' London house suggests a parallel decay of the characters' minds and of the house caused by the transmission of trauma. After Leah returned from New York and the breach between the siblings and their father took place, the housekeeper left and "the house went to seed. It slumped and turned in on itself" (112). The decay of the house takes place at the same time as the siblings stop leaving the house which is triggered by Leah's refusal to support her father's obsession with his father's study. The power of the symbiotic relationship to their father, which is caused by his traumatic loss of his parents, over the siblings' lives and minds is thus reflected in the condition of the house. Houses hence mirror the mind of characters traumatized by the Holocaust. However, also other traumas can have a similar effect on the homes of those sufferings from them. Aaron's neighbors retreat to their house after their son was killed in the war: "After that, the Biletskis disappeared inside their house. Wild grass grew up around it, the curtains were always drawn" (185). The drawn curtains and the neglected garden reflect the emotional and physical withdrawal of the house's inhabitants. The house hence symbolizes minds traumatized by war or Holocaust experiences. It is moreover a resort for Aaron, Dovik, Lotte, the Weisz, Nadia, and others when the world's onslaught is too much for them to bear. Both aspects link the traumas of the house's inhabitants by suggesting similar psychological and behavioral consequences for the victims.

The collective historical traumas of the Holocaust and the military dictatorship become linked through the symbol of the house when Nadia sees Weisz in Jerusalem about the desk. Nadia's mind wanders to Varsky and the desk, attributing the sadness she feels to the idea that Varsky might have been to the same house. "Peering into the dusty garden," Nadia experiences a sudden "sadness that came from the uncanny feeling of being in a place that had been touched, however obliquely, by Daniel Varsky" (224-25). The house that reflects his owner's traumatized state hence triggers the emergence of the second trauma and the emotions linked to it.

All meanings of the symbol of the house I have discussed so far can be considered as being represented by the novel's title. In addition, the novel presents straightforwardly the origin of its title, which contributes to the functioning of the symbol of the house as a linking element. In his conversation with Arthur about the desk, very close to the end of the novel,

Weisz relates one of his father's favorite stories from Jewish religious heritage about the first-century rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai who, by means of a ruse, could escape from Jerusalem before the Romans destroyed the Temple and burned the town down. Faced with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jews being sent into exile, ben Zakkai wonders: "What is a Jew without Jerusalem? How can you be a Jew without a nation?" (278). To answer these questions, the rabbi built a school in which the laws of the Jews were to be written down – in what came to be known as the Talmud – and he replaced sacrifices to God by prayers. Weisz ends the story as follows:

Only later, after ben Zakkai died, did his answer slowly reveal itself, the way an enormous mural only begins to make sense as you walk backwards away: Turn the Temple into a book, a book as vast and holy and intricate as the city itself. Bend a people around the shape of what they lost, and let everything mirror its absent form. Later his school became known as the Great House, after the phrase in Books of Kings: *He burned the house of God, the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem; even every great house he burned with fire.* (279; emphasis in original)

"Great House" has two religious meanings: it is the name of ben Zakkai's school and it designates the houses in Jerusalem. Both meanings are linked to the destruction of Jerusalem and, consequently, to the question what comes after the destruction.<sup>121</sup> The story told by Weisz is also in two ways linked to the theme of transgenerational transmission after trauma since ben Zakkai looks for ways to pass on the cultural/religious heritage of the Jews after the destruction of Jerusalem, and since the story as part of the heritage is passed on from father to son in the Weisz family. It is thus something that remained after Weisz's father and so many other Jews were murdered by the Nazis. The quoted text passage is also suggestive of trauma in general in several ways: First, it alludes to loss and destruction. Second, it takes up – or rather is the origin of – Weisz's description of his clients as having "bent their memories around a void" (275) as reaction to traumatic loss. Third, it evokes Freud's reading of Jewish monotheism as being founded on traumatic experience (e.g. in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism*, see Caruth, *Unclaimed* 70; Leys 279) and thereby the "crippling burden" that traumatic memories can be for the survivors and subsequent generations. In an interview, Krauss linked the story to trauma explaining that she was so fascinated by the story "[b]ecause

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<sup>121</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the contexts from which the story and the original quote are taken see Berger and Milbauer (75-76).

the answer to catastrophic loss was absolute reimagination” which turned “a Jewish story” into a “very universal idea” (Krauss, “Nicole”). By suggesting reimagination as a way of living on after destruction, which applies universally, the story of “Great House” thus highlights another possible connection between different traumas. After the Holocaust, Weisz transfers the strategy of coping suggested in the story almost literally to his life by bending around the absent form of the desk. Besides the story, also knowledge of how the “reimagination” after destruction could work was transmitted from his father to Weisz. He tells Arthur:

Two thousand years have passed, my father used to tell me, and now every Jewish soul is built around the house that burned in that fire, so vast that we can, each one of us, only recall the tiniest fragment: a pattern on the wall, a knot in the wood of a door, a memory of how light fell across the floor. But if every Jewish memory were put together, every last holy fragment joined up again as one, the House would be built again . . . or rather a memory of the House so perfect that it would be, in essence, the original itself. Perhaps that is what they mean when they speak of the Messiah: a perfect assemblage of the infinite parts of the Jewish memory. In the next world, we will dwell together in the memory of our memories. But that will not be for us . . . We live, each of us, to preserve our fragment, in a state of perpetual regret and longing for a place we only know existed because we remember a keyhole, a tile, the way the threshold was worn under an open door. (Krauss, *Great* 279)

Once more, Weisz repeats his own words about his clients, whose depictions of the furniture they want him to find allow him to “*see the way the light fell across the wooden floor*” (274; my emphasis) in their childhood homes. The repetition of the phrase brings out the role of Holocaust survivors as bearers of the memory fragments evoked by Weisz’s tale and his task of preserving them with the help of the furniture. This reading is supported by a comparison Weisz draws between the furniture he retrieves and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. He tells Arthur that, when he recovers a lost piece of furniture, his clients “can hardly believe it, as if I’d produced the gold and silver sacked when the Romans destroyed the Temple two thousand years ago” (275). Weisz’s renarration of his father’s explanations adds another meaning to the symbol of the house: the house is likened to the Messiah and thus to the savior of the Jewish people,<sup>122</sup> which both can – or must – be constructed from memory fragments which, since the (re)construction will not take place in the present, have to be passed on to the following generations. By linking “Jewish memory and the rebuilding of the Great House (the Jerusalem Temple) to the meaning of Messiah” (Berger and Milbauer 75), the story of ben

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<sup>122</sup> Berger and Milbauer offer a more religiously informed reading of “Great House” and also elaborate on the special meaning of Yoav’s and Isabel’s naming their son David with regard to the Messiah (Berger and Milbauer 75f).

Zakkai and the subsequent explanations thus show, that *Great House* offers a possible “answer to catastrophic loss” insisting on the need to (re)connect scattered memories of traumatic events, such as the destruction of Jerusalem or the Holocaust, and the importance of passing on such memories from one generation to the next. In my reading, the scattered memories are not solely or necessarily memories of collective Jewish traumas but can – or need to – include others, such as those of the military dictatorship in Chile. It is not by chance, that, in *Great House*, the characters and objects symbolizing the Holocaust always also symbolize trauma in general, and, in some instances, also the torture and killing of Daniel Varsky by Pinochet’s henchmen, and the expulsion of Palestinians. When Nadia remembers Varsky telling her about the tunnels in the Judean Hills, “where the followers of Bar Kochba lost their minds waiting out the Romans, through which Daniel had slid with nothing but a match to light his way” (Krauss, *Great* 204), Varsky and the trauma he embodies become directly linked to the story of the Great House and Jerusalem’s destruction at the hands of the Romans. Moreover, the notion that the necessary reimagination after traumatic events is not limited to Jewish traumas is also illustrated by the meta-discussion of trauma discourses the novel offers and which I will analyze below.

### **Intertextuality**

Like the three other novels discussed in this paper, *Great House* draws on intertextuality in its treatment of collective historical traumas. The novel abounds with references to writers from Israel, Europe and South America (e.g. Krauss, *Great* 4, 9, 82, 144, 203, 286), to films (e.g. 131, 166, 167), religious texts (54), and paintings (151). In addition to the allusions to Freud’s work (110-11), the photograph of Jews “awaiting deportation to Treblinka” (155), and the story of the Great House (279) analyzed above, many other references underline the novel’s occupation with collective traumatic experiences. Isabel reads works by Paul Virilio (126), historian of warfare and soldier during the Algerian War, and Thomas Bernhard, educated in Nazi institutions and critic of Austria’s Nazi past. Nadia has a dream of people’s skin turning into the skin of rhinoceroses thus alluding to Eugène Ionesco’s play *Rhinocéros* (35) which shows how easily individuals submit to a totalitarian regime.

Two intertextual references stand out because they are subtler and because they summon up collective historical traumas not dealt with in *Great House*, thus producing further connections between traumas. Aaron’s repeated interjection “pass over it” (e.g. 53, 73, 189, 193) expresses his attempt to repress uncomfortable memories, for example of his military

service (49), since he finds no use in dwelling on them (49). The brevity and banalness of the phrase as well as the way in which it is inserted into the narrative evokes as intertext one of the most popular US-American trauma novels dealing with the bombing of Dresden, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the protagonist/narrator of the book inside the novel comments on the cruelties, the death and destruction he witnesses by repeatedly using the phrase "So it goes". Just like Aaron in *Great House*, the narrator avoids dealing with the events, the phrase reflecting "almost a shrugging acceptance of the inevitable" (Bloom 25). But also like in *Great House*, the repetition of the phrase turns it into a "wail of grief" (Bloom 105) over the insufferable events it is supposed to shrug off. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the trite interjection usually stands in stark contrast to the ample and direct depictions of human bloodshed. Rosewater, the narrator's roommate in hospital, for example, "had shot a fourteen-year-old fireman, mistaking him for a German soldier. So it goes" (Vonnegut 87), and it "was the next night that about one hundred and thirty thousand people in Dresden would die. So it goes" (142). The narrator also relates how the prisoners of war were forced to dig for bodies after the air raid:

There were hundreds of corpse mines operating by and by. They didn't smell bad at first, were wax museums. But then the bodies rotted and liquefied . . .  
So it goes. (185)

Aaron's phrase thus evokes an intertext which deals with the devastating US-American warfare against Germany in the Second World War, a text in which the protagonist qualifies the bombing of Dresden as "the greatest massacre in European history" (87). Intertextuality hence brings into a novel written by an American Jew, granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, and dealing with the ongoing impact of the Holocaust on the lives of the following generations, the notion of Americans as perpetrators and Germans as victims. This aspect links *Great House*, in addition, to Foer's novel, which also refers to Vonnegut's text and undertakes the same unexpected reversal of perspective – even though not in relation to the Holocaust but to the terrorist attacks on September 11. By alluding to yet another collective historical trauma, in which US-Americans are considered the victims, the reference contributes to the problematization of the categories "victim" and "perpetrator" that the comparison between the expulsion of Palestinians and that of Jews under the Nazis suggests. By detour via *Slaughterhouse-Five*, not only the bombing of Dresden is added to the collective historical traumas of the Holocaust, the dictatorship in Chile, the wars fought by Israel and its conflict

with the Palestinians, but also 9/11 covertly enters Krauss' novel, even if only through this slight hint.

Dovik's story about the shark constitutes the second intertextual reference which contributes to the subtlety of *Great House's* depiction of and position with regard to the parallel treatment of several collective historical traumas. The first chapter presented from Aaron's point of view begins with his attempt at dissuading Dovik from becoming a writer and Dovik refuting him by offering a sketch of the story he wants to write:

You told me a convoluted story about four, six, maybe eight people all lying in rooms joined by a system of electrodes and wires to a great white shark. All night the shark floats suspended in an illuminated tank, dreaming the dreams of these people. No, not the dreams, the nightmares, the things too difficult to bear. So they sleep, and through the wires the terrifying things leave them and flood into the awesome fish with scarred skin that can bear all the accumulated misery. (Krauss, *Great* 47)

This short summary of Dovik's story exposes that the story treats in condensed form two main themes of the novel: First, it asks the question how to deal with "the nightmares, the things too difficult to bear" (47), which in my reading stand for traumatic memories since in Aaron's chapters he and his son are depicted as, at least temporarily, overwhelmed by their traumatic experiences during war, and most characters in the novel suffer from nightmares. Second, the story presents bringing together the nightmares, or traumas, of different people as a possible answer to this question. The significance of the story of the shark is underlined by Krauss who claims that "it became a strong underground current directing the novel, a way for me to think about the book as a whole, these different voices, confessions, or dreams, that are all being channeled toward some unified point" (Krauss, *Essay*). This "underground current" resurfaces three times in the course of Aaron's narrative (Krauss, *Great* 66, 179-80, 181-2), analog to Aaron's interrupted readings of the story. In its second and third appearance, Aaron's summaries again emphasize its dealing with the "connected nightmares of many" (66) and the function of the shark "as repository for human sadness. Who takes all that the dreamers cannot bear, who bears the violence of their accumulated feeling" (179). The shark relieves the people, who are called "patients" (180) hinting at their pathologic situation, of what is too sad and violent to bear by one's self. The shark's function as container of human trauma is supported by two aspects included in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* to which the story refers. In Foer's novel, the need of sharks to swim because otherwise they will die is linked to Oskar's need to act after the traumatic experience of his father's death in the World Trade Center. Oskar decides to see all people named Black in New York because "[even] if it was

relatively insignificant, it was something,” and he “needed to do something, like sharks, who die if they don’t swim” (Foer 87). Like in Krauss’ novel, the shark in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is related to trauma, here pointing to the need of survivors to act in order to overcome trauma. One of Oskar’s inventions can be seen as a precursor of Krauss’s shark since it collects the tears of the inhabitants of New York, who in Foer’s novel are as traumatized for the most part:

In bed that night I invented a special drain that would be underneath every pillow in New York, and would connect to the reservoir. Whenever people cried themselves to sleep, the tears would all go to the same place, and in the morning the weatherman could report if the water level of the Reservoir of Tears had gone up or down, and you could know if New York was in heavy boots. And when something *really* terrible happened – like a nuclear bomb, or at least a biological weapons attack – an extremely loud siren would go off, telling everyone to get to Central Park to put sandbags around the reservoir. (Foer 38)

In Foer’s novel, crying is consistently associated with trauma – Oskar tries to repress his tears (159, 203), the people trapped in the World Trade Center cry (301), just like Oskar’s classmates after his Hiroshima presentation (190). Oskar’s invention of the Reservoir of Tears is necessary because the population of New York cry themselves to sleep after the attacks on the World Trade Center and further attacks (with a nuclear bomb, biological weapons) are to be expected and will cause more suffering and tears. The collection of tears in a common point emerges as necessary for practical reasons – to estimate the population’s suffering, for example. In contrast to the shark in *Great House*, the Reservoir of Tears in Foer’s novel does not alleviate the burden of those connected to it, maybe because for Oskar it is unimaginable at that point that his pain will ever ease. Even if Krauss’s character invents the shark to achieve the unimaginable, the novel does not present an easy solution to the problem of suffering. The shark turns sick from the nightmares he absorbs (Krauss, *Great* 66), and Aaron raises a number of questions:

Sometimes I had to wait weeks . . . I would be left in the dark, not knowing what would happen next. Only that the shark was getting sicker and sicker. Knowing what Beringer [the janitor] knew, but which he kept from the dreamers in their windowless rooms: that the shark wouldn’t live forever. And then what, Dovik? Where would they go, these people? How would they live? . . .

I never found out. The last section you sent home was three weeks before you were sent to Sinai. (182)

The story of the shark remains unfinished in *Great House*, arguably due to the traumatic experience of its author in the war. It suggests that connecting traumatic experiences relieves those suffering from them of a burden, but, since the shark can apparently not work as a

container forever, also puts into question the durability of this solution. The necessity of a device which connects those suffering from trauma arises in both novels, however, and thus implies a need of the victims for a shared relief independent of the cause of their suffering. Both devices to deal with the consequences of trauma are invented by children or young adults, which underlines the novel's call for reimagination after the traumatic event as expressed by the story of the Great House.

The story of the shark discusses the establishment of connections between traumas on a meta-level since it does not name the causes of the nightmares. Also, the story of the Great House aims at a universal approach to overcoming traumatic loss. In the following section, I will show that Krauss integrates several other meta-discussions of trauma concepts and discourses in the novel.

### 6.5.2. The Transmission of Trauma and Challenges to the Classic Trauma Discourse

The transmission of trauma is a strong theme in the novel. By presenting Nadia as well as the siblings as traumatized, *Great House* suggests that trauma, independent of its cause, can be transmitted to persons related to the direct victims. Moreover, the elements used in *Great House* to establish links between traumatic histories, like the symbols of the desk and the house, all also symbolize the transgenerational transmission of trauma. The novel's emphasis on the transmission of trauma suggests that collective historical traumas share the trait of being passed on from one generation to the next. If traumas are passed on across time and space, it is highly probable that they connect to and influence the perception and representation of other traumas. The reaction of the father of the soldier whom Dovik could not save exemplifies this process. The notion of trauma's transmission hence evokes Rothberg's argument on multidirectional memory, makes a case for a juxtaposed representation of traumas, and, consequently, questions the discourse on the uniqueness and incomparability of the Holocaust.

By revealing similarities between the collective historical traumas presented, *Great House* furthermore hints at the paradoxes inherent in the argumentation of the advocates of the uniqueness discourse. Krauss counteracts the alleged incomparability of the Holocaust using comparisons between the expulsion of the Palestinians with that of Jews by the Nazis, or the parallels Lotte alludes to between Pinochet's policies of torture and murder and those conducted by the Nazis.

Finally, the novel even cautions against the sanctification of the Holocaust. The criticism of this assumption resonates in Aaron's summary of the letter from the Birkenau survivor and father of the soldier could not save in battle:

It was not an eloquent letter, but the crudeness made it worse. He blamed you for the death of his son. *You took his watch*, he wrote in spindly handwriting, *and let my son die. How do you live with yourself?* He had survived Birkenau, and brought this into it. He summoned the courage of the Jewish inmates at the hands of the SS, and called you a coward. (Krauss, *Great* 188; emphasis in original)

The writer of the letter compares Dovik's behavior as a soldier to that of extermination camp inmates. The text passage thus evokes a discourse on the unreached horrors and, consequently, accords all victims and survivors the virtually sacrosanct status of heroes. In accordance with this line of thinking, Aaron keeps his wife from calling the writer of the letter "to shout at him" and defend Dovik since "[h]is parents were murdered and now he has lost his only son" (189). In the novel, Dovik's alleged failure in comparison to the heroic extermination camp inmates causes the young man, who fought to preserve the state of Israel, and thus the direct interests of the man who denounces him as coward, to be utterly traumatized. The letter puts Dovik over the edge, his already deplorable state marked by his war experience turns into a prototypical state of PTSD, ironically mirroring the state of those who survived Nazi camps like Birkenau. The use of the comparison to the Holocaust is hence put into question by the devastating effects it has on Dovik. Moreover, the text passage can be read as criticism of the often "crude" way in which the Holocaust is used – "brought . . . into it" – to evoke feelings of guilt and shortcoming in succeeding generations. The same mechanisms are at work in Aaron's reaction to Dovik's "throwing a fit about the bathwater not reaching exactly the level [he] liked" (73) when he was a child:

When I was your age, I shouted, shaking you so hard your head wobbled sickeningly on your neck, there was nothing to eat, and no money for toys, the house was always cold, but we went outside and played . . . and lived because we had our lives, while the others were being murdered in the pogroms . . .! And look at you! You have everything in the world, and all you do is shriek your head off and make everyone's life miserable! (73)

The lesson Aaron tries to teach his son in this text passage is that he has no right to complain since, compared to the victims of the pogroms, he leads a happy and carefree life. Berger and Milbauer state that "this type of admonishment, which invalidates or diminishes a child's concern by comparing it to the experience of a real trauma, is frequently reported in literature dealing with children of Holocaust survivors" (80-81). The text passages thus offer further

examples of how traumatic memories are passed on to children by means of comparison and emphasize at the same time the omnipresence of the Holocaust in the lives of especially Jewish post-World War II generations.

The urgency of *Great House's* depiction of the suffering of Weisz and Lotte, two Holocaust survivors who lost all their family, and the Holocaust's constant presence as trigger of characters' conduct – for example the siblings, Aaron – suggests that the inclusion of other traumatic histories does not diminish the legacy of the Holocaust. The novel even insinuates that Jews because of their history and heritage are experienced in and made for collecting traumatic experiences. Aaron believes that he keeps Dovik from studying philosophy for his own good: “From a young age, you tirelessly searched for and collected suffering...you read books on the alienation of modern man. What does modern man have on the Jews? I demanded . . . The Jews have been living in alienation for thousands of years” (Krauss, *Great* 68). Again in this passage, the reader is pointed to the story of the sharks – Dovik's way of imagining and processing the collection of suffering.

Another assumption of the classic trauma discourse which Krauss broaches in her novel is the truthfulness of traumatic memory, discussed for example in Caruth (“Trauma”). *Great House* suggests that it is possible to reassemble “a memory of the House so perfect that it would be, in essence, the original itself” (Krauss, *Great* 279), and thus questions the need for truthfulness. This challenge is underlined when Weisz admits that he sometimes produces pieces of furniture of whom he knows that they are not the ones he was engaged to find because the client “needs it to be that bed where she once lay with him more than he needs to know the truth” (276). Krauss offers imagination as a valid alternative to truthfulness.

Despite its criticism of discourses of incomparability and uniqueness, Krauss' tour de force of trauma representation does not present the juxtaposition of several collective historical traumas as unproblematic. For the traumatized characters, facing a second trauma worsens their condition, as the example of Lotte illustrates: “Tortured first and then killed, she said, and as her voice slid over those nightmarish last words it didn't catch in her throat or contract to hold back tears, but rather expanded, the way pupils do in the dark, as if it contained not one nightmare but many” (104). Lotte's reaction can be read in two ways: first, the use of the word “expanded” hints at the amplification of the existing trauma since it adds to Lotte's own experience of persecution and political violence, which she re-experiences in nightmares repeatedly. Second, it highlights structural similarities between the experiences of the victims

of the two historical traumas (“not one nightmare but many”) thereby affirming Lotte’s trauma caused loss of trust in safety since such violent and barbarous deeds happen again. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of traumas increases the risk inherent in all representations of historical traumas of abusing the suffering of others for commercial, publicity or simply aesthetic ends. Nadia voices this risk when remembering her break-up talk with her husband:

And as we spoke a picture of myself emerged and developed . . . , a picture of myself to hang on the wall next to the one I’d already been living with for months – the one of someone who made use of the pain of others for her own ends, who, while others suffered, starved, and were tormented, hid herself safely away and prided herself on her special perceptiveness and sensitivity to the symmetry buried below things (39).

*Great House* presents possible outcomes, negative as well as positive, of linking different historical traumas. In a parallel to the novel’s open ending, the weighing up does not yield a clear result. However, one should note that the drawbacks Krauss puts forward are all situated on the level of the individual, like Lotte’s and Dovik’s at least temporarily increased suffering, for instance, while the benefits of the connection affect individuals, as in the story of the shark, as well as whole communities, as in the junction of fragmented memories suggested by the story of the Great House, which furthermore underlines the idea that the reassembled fragments produce a meaning which exceeds the sum of the single parts.

### **6.6. Interim Conclusions: Probing the Juxtaposition of Traumas on a Meta-Level**

An analysis of *Great House* considering literary techniques and recurring themes can best account for the pluralities of approaches to the juxtaposition of collective historical traumas as well as its involvement with a meta-critique of trauma discourses. It brings to light that recurring characters and symbols as well as intertextuality constitute the major links between traumas. Compared to the three previously analyzed novels, intertextuality plays a more pronounced role in the representation and assessment of links between traumas.

Moreover, maybe because *Great House* was the last one to be published of the novels of this study, it deals more than the other novels with discourses of incomparability and discusses the outcome of connections without clear reference to specific traumas. Krauss trades the benefits of connecting different traumatic memories off against its drawbacks. She presents different outcomes of this connection: On the one hand, for Lotte, the merging of the deeds of the military dictatorship in Chile, in the person of Varsky, with her Holocaust memories results in an emotional crisis. Similarly, Dovik’s suffering is increased when his war trauma is related to

the Holocaust memories of his fellow soldier's father. On the other hand, by drawing on religious heritage *Great House* puts forward the idea that, for the sake of living on, it is necessary to unite the fragmented memories of catastrophic events to achieve a sense of wholeness, even if the process of composition is deferred to the future. A more ambiguous outcome of the connection of traumas is presented in the story inside the story that Dovik wrote.

Despite Krauss' rejection of the category "Holocaust novel," and in contrast to the three other novels analyzed, the Holocaust is the major trauma and major point of reference in *Great House*. Other collective historical traumas appear in the novel infrequently but with important functions. *Great House* takes a clear stance towards discourses which insist on the unique quality of the Holocaust and, consequently, on its incomparability to other historical traumas. It does so by transgressing the rules of this discourse and by revealing the negative outcomes it can yield. Moreover, through the structure of the novel and the literary strategies she applies, Krauss suggests that connections exist between stories, historical traumas, and the memories of them, even if they are sometimes hidden, and that "whatever architecture of echoes and symmetries will be created among these moving parts, these remote characters and stories will be far more interesting than what they each might be if they kind of stand alone" (Krauss, "Conversation"). One could thus claim that Krauss makes a similar, even if less strong, point as Rothberg who insists that links between different collective traumatic histories have always existed, even if they were marginalized and forgotten (e.g. 7, 22).

The introductory quote to my analysis of the juxtaposition of traumas in *Great House*, "A shark as repository for human sadness. Who takes all that the dreamers cannot bear, who bears the violence of their accumulated feeling" (Krauss, *Great* 179), illustrates its main results: the use of intertextual reference as means to evoke links between traumas, the meta-discussion of the juxtaposition of traumas, and the notion that imagination plays an important role in overcoming trauma. The notion of (re)imagination also brings up Rothberg's argument that "imaginative links between different histories and social groups" (18) are the means to transcend competitive views on victimhood and the discourse of the incomparability of traumas.

## 7. Conclusions and Future Research

### 7.1. Synopsis of the Text Analyses

#### 7.1.1. The Novels' Choices of Collective Historical Traumas

The novels analyzed in this study all deal with a different selection of collective historical traumas: *What You Owe Me* focuses on the Holocaust, Racism and Slavery; *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* deals with 9/11, the bombing of Dresden, the bombing of Hiroshima, and the Holocaust; *Let the Great World Spin* includes 9/11, IRA terrorism, the hurricanes Rita and Katrina, different wars, racism and slavery; the major trauma in *Great House* is the Holocaust, but the dictatorship in Chile, wars waged in and by Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict also play significant roles. This list brings several important points to the fore: Despite criticism of the Holocaust's alleged status as measuring rod for traumas, its impact is still significant in the contemporary American trauma novel – at least in those works dealing with several traumas – since it figures in all but one of the analyzed novels significantly and even in McCann's novel it is alluded to several times.

The preponderance of the Holocaust can be explained by three factors: First, two of the three authors are descendants of survivors of the Holocaust. Second, with regard to Campbell, the novel is to be seen in a tradition of fictional texts which juxtapose the Holocaust and the discrimination and enslavement of Black people in the US. Close to the end of the 2013 Hollywood blockbuster *The Butler*, the aged protagonist and his wife visit the barracks in which he grew up as a slave. This scene is accompanied by a voice-over commentary from the protagonist stating that "Americans always turned a blind eye to what we'd done to our own. . . . We hear about the concentration camps, but these camps went on for 200 years right here in America" (Daniels). As this example from a movie about the Black fight for equal rights illustrates, the Holocaust is still a point of reference in the struggle for acknowledgment of the injustices committed against Black Americans. Third, since *What You Owe Me*, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, and *Great House* criticize explicitly or implicitly the claimed incomparability of traumas, which is based on the assumption of the Holocaust's uniqueness with regard to cruelty, death toll, and traumatic consequences, it makes sense to include the Holocaust to highlight commonalities with other traumas and show that a juxtaposition does not diminish its horrors. My analysis hence shows that for contemporary American novels

dealing with several collective historical traumas the Holocaust continues to constitute the common benchmark.<sup>123</sup>

Another common concern of all novels, even if in different depth, are wars. *What You Owe Me* refers to the Second World War and the Vietnam War to underline racist practices in recruiting and warfare; *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* includes accounts of bombings during the Second World War, gives a list covering the major wars of the twentieth century, and refers to the wars waged as reaction to 9/11; *Let the Great World Spin* refers to contemporary and historic wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Guatemala, to the Second World War, and it deals with the Vietnam War in depth; *Great House* includes two characters traumatized by fighting for Israel in the Arab-Israeli War of 1948, the Suez War of 1956, and the Yom Kippur War of 1973. By each including at least two wars, the novels reflect the continuity of warfare and hence, arguably, make a point about the ongoing human suffering caused by man. The surfacing of the Vietnam War in all novels except *Great House*, which yet alludes to it via the intertextual references to *Slaughterhouse-Five*, highlights the ongoing significance of this traumatic experience for US-American culture.

Foer's and McCann's novels were written in direct response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and thus include this collective historical trauma. Its absence from *What You Owe Me* can be attributed to its publication date in August 2001. Its absence from *Great House*, by contrast, raises questions. The novel was published in 2010, just one year after *Let the Great World Spin*, so the time distance alone cannot account for its author's stylistic decision. Possible explanations are that the focus on the transgenerational transmission of trauma of Krauss' novel rules 9/11 out, or that its inclusion is deemed to interfere with the second major concern of the novel, namely the re-evaluation of discourses surrounding the Holocaust.

It is furthermore striking that the discrimination of Black people and their enslavement play only a role in two novels, in the one written by a Black author and in the one written by an author who grew up outside the US. One can deduce two possible reasons for the absence of these two intricately linked traumas from the novels by Foer and Krauss: First, the Jewish

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<sup>123</sup> The fact that none of the novels, not even *Great House*, is discussed as Holocaust writing as well as the novels' balanced and metaphorical dealing with this collective historical trauma clears the novels of the suspicion that they want to benefit from the cultural industry that has become known as "Holocaust industry" (Finkelstein) or "Hollycaust" (Rothe) because it is suspected of exploiting the Holocaust for economic reasons.

heritage of the authors might trigger an urge to compare contemporary traumas, as 9/11 and the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with events from the Second World War that have influenced their own upbringing and identity. Second, except for 9/11, which caused Foer to write his novel in the first place, both authors relate the Holocaust only to traumas taking or having taken place outside of the United States, e.g. in Germany, Japan, Chile, or Israel. Whether this literary choice bespeaks a more global approach to the question of juxtaposing traumas is hard to say and prove. In any event, it cannot be explained by a respect for the sanctified status of the Holocaust since the authors challenge this status repeatedly. It is certainly noteworthy that, according to my research, there is no contemporary example of a novel written by a Jewish American author that “faces” Black American and Jewish American experiences like *What You Owe Me*. This lack could be explained by the Holocaust’s long-term functioning as measuring rod for other collective traumas whose victims tried to gain public attention by using the Holocaust as point of reference – a move unnecessary for the Jewish community. An alternative explanation could be that the diverging economic and social development of Black Americans and Jewish Americans during the last decades has turned a common fight for acknowledgement obsolete. Accordingly, Jewish authors might shy away from assuming the point of view of Black Americans due to the status they have meanwhile reached within the white hegemonic population.

Karen Tei Yamashita’s novel *I Hotel* is an example of a cluster of collective historical traumas completely absent from the novels of this study, namely the discrimination of Asian-Americans which historically took the form of the Japanese internment during World War II, or the migration laws against Chinese immigrants, for instance. The Native American trauma of colonization and persecution is similarly absent. Only the character Mooney in Campbell’s novel includes it in its list of groups that have received recompense for their suffering from the US-government (Campbell 341). A reason for the absence of this US-American trauma in the analyzed novels might be the shying away from assuming the point of view of Native Americans since Native American author Sherman Alexie called texts about “Indians” by “non-Indians” “colonial literature” (Fraser 84) and claimed that “non-Indians should quit writing about us until we’ve established our voice – a completely voluntary moratorium” (Chapel 98). While Campbell’s novel offers a Black woman’s perspective on the juxtaposition of traumas, research for this study unearthed no novel dealing with Native American trauma in juxtaposition with other collective historical traumas. In view of Lilian Friedberg’s article, “Dare to Compare:

Americanizing the Holocaust”, already published in 2000, the nonexistence of novels by Native Americans juxtaposing traumas, or at least about the traumatic experiences of Native Americans in contrast with other traumatic histories, is startling. Friedberg challenges arguments on the incomparability of the Holocaust by highlighting parallels with “the genocide against indigenous populations in North America” (Friedberg 355–56) and calls for a “‘solidarity of memory’ that might fundamentally challenge majority culture” and “must be the aim of any comparison of ‘minority’ situations” (Friedberg 369). Similarly, Alexie stated that genocides are comparable (Nygren 154). There thus seems to be a strand of Native American writers and critics that considers juxtaposing traumatic experiences favorably or even deems it necessary. Arguably, the still ongoing struggle of Native Americans to be heard in the polyphony of and to be accepted as traumatized in the US-context, advocates the concentration on one, that is one’s own trauma, and consequently might explain the non-existence of novels juxtaposing the Native American trauma of colonization, persecution and genocide with other collective historical traumas.

Irrespective of the choice of traumas, the number of collective traumas included and thus the complexity of links established between them, has risen since the publication of *What You Owe Me* and hence, arguably, since 9/11, as such a complex novel as *I Hotel* illustrates. Nonetheless, from the analyses of the four novels arises a tendency to focus on two to three collective historical traumas and include other traumas selectively to underline main points. An example of this strategy is McCann’s mentioning of the “attacks on Afghanistan” (McCann, *Let* 341).

### 7.1.2. Strategies for Connecting Traumas

As I have shown, also novels dealing with several collective historical traumas can be analyzed using the classic approaches to trauma fiction with the result that a traumatization of the characters and a direct or indirect representation of underlying traumas can be asserted. This then allows for a classification of the texts as trauma narratives, or, in the case of *Let the Great World Spin* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* even more narrowly, as ‘9/11 novel’, and in the case of *Great House* as third-generation Holocaust writing. The novels analyzed make all ample use of literary strategies proposed by the classic trauma discourse: they attribute symptoms of PTSD to their characters, let narratives circle around traumatic experiences or replace direct representation by other means, such as metaphors or telling gaps, changing

perspectives and narrative modes, and highlighting the difficulties of expressing the traumatic experience. Also trauma's alleged capacity to haunt occurs in all novels. The inclusion of pictures, blanks, and correction marks in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* can furthermore be interpreted as a reaction to the call for experimental artistic forms (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 5). Concerning the depiction of PTSD symptoms, certain preferences can be discerned: depressions, the struggle to put the traumatic experience into words, and the suppression of traumatic memories and their recurrence in nightmares appear in all novels. The symptom of survivor's guilt is also present in all novels but *Let the Great World Spin*, suggesting that this symptom is still above all associated with the Holocaust.

To analyze the strategies for connecting traumas in *Great House* and *What You Owe Me*, classic methodological tools from literary and trauma studies suffice: In *What You Owe Me*, explicit comparisons of the traumas of the Holocaust, racism and slavery are complemented by metaphors and intertextuality. The notions that trauma can be transmitted across generations and that one traumatic memory can trigger another one also link traumas. In addition, the novel offers the theme of beauty as sign of the reconstruction of dignity as an element linking the traumas. In *Great House*, recurring characters and symbols constitute the major links between the traumas of the Holocaust, the dictatorship in Chile, the wars waged in and by Israel, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Intertextuality forms a bridge to further collective historical traumas, such as 9/11 and the bombing of Dresden. In addition, the novel's emphasis on the transmission of trauma suggests that collective historical traumas share the trait of being passed on from one generation to the next. On a meta-level, Krauss' novel links traumatic memories in the story of the shark.

The physical proximity of the traumas of the bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima, 9/11, and the Holocaust at the center of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* as well as the accumulation of historical traumas in the introduction of A.R. Black can be analyzed with the tools of literary studies. This holds also true for the symbols Foer uses, such as the door knobs, or the fire images. However, these links mainly highlight that Foer brings together several collective historical traumas deliberately, and that in all of the traumas the novel deals with fire was a deathly element. Intertextuality produces in Foer's novel connections to other novels dealing with 9/11 or World War II hence reinforcing Foer's approach to consider these two events in conjunction. *Let the Great World Spin* applies even fewer classic literary strategies to connect traumas. Only the metaphorical use of New York's boroughs to relate 9/11 to the

bombings of Saigon and Dresden, and the symbol of the coin, which underlines that suffering is a common human trait, connects all traumas included in the novel. Other symbols like the Falling Man or the helicopter stand for trauma but do not produce connections. Foer's and McCann's novels hence differ significantly from the novels by Krauss and Campbell in their approach to the juxtaposed representation of trauma. In both novels, the most complex and significant links between traumas emerge only when concepts from different disciplines are applied to the analysis. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* deploys magic realist elements and psychogeographical writing to elucidate the commonalities of collective historical traumas: their cruelty and the subsequent reduction of victims to the most basic (sensual) capacities and needs. McCann's novel makes use of the possibilities of network concepts producing connections through time conflation and positioning 9/11 as trigger and hub in a network of traumas. In *Let the Great World Spin*, 9/11 is the collision point, around which a web of traumas crystallizes and through which traumatic histories are linked equitably. The combination of network and literary trauma theory in the study of *Let the Great World Spin* and the examination of magic realist and psychogeographical elements in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* thus reveal ways in which traumas can be linked without drawing on explicit comparisons. Both novels offer new perspectives on collective historical traumas and the ways they can be narrativized conjointly in one novel.

Finally, in all novels, intertextuality plays an important role in strengthening links between established traumas or in embracing additional traumas to those the novel deals with explicitly. Besides intertextuality, the analyses revealed no other strategy deployed by all authors to juxtapose traumas. The use of symbolism is prevalent but all novels use different metaphors, only the ghost can be argued to recur in Krauss' and Campbell's novels. *What You Owe Me* is the only novel which compares traumas explicitly declaring racism in Texas "another kind of death camp" (Campbell 14).

The four novels analyzed in this study suggest two approaches to the juxtaposed representation of collective historical traumas: The novels by Campbell and Krauss apply literary devices and recurring themes to invoke links between traumas. McCann's and Foer's novels suggest that traditional literary tools for representing trauma do not suffice to juxtapose traumas in a satisfying manner. They thus turn to narrative innovation by combining genres and concepts not usually applied in the representation of trauma.

### 7.1.3. Text-Immanent Assessments of the Juxtaposition of Traumas and the Novels' Positions towards the Classic Trauma Discourse

The juxtaposition of collective historical traumas, in particular if one of the traumas is the Holocaust, is a delicate matter due to debates surrounding the comparability of suffering and the struggle for recognition as well the special status of the Holocaust as incomparably horrible. The novels of this study nonetheless engage in this sensitive field and display their authors' awareness of these debates in various ways. From my analyses three approaches to engaging with these debates emerge: First, *What You Owe Me* refers to discourses which presuppose a fight for public attention and a hierarchy of suffering indirectly and overtly. The ghost symbolizing the injustices committed against Blacks elbows its way through the ghosts of the Holocaust victims to claim Gilda's attention and alludes to Morrison's comparison of the numbers of victims of slavery and the Holocaust. Hosanna's coworker's belief that those who suffer the most will receive the highest recompense and Mooney's list of recompenses that the 'other' victim groups received broach discourses on the "contest of victims" and the "hierarchy of suffering". Second, in the novels by McCann and Foer challenges to the classic trauma discourse are less pronounced. They find expression rather on the level of representational choices than on the linguistic level compared with Campbell's novel. They question the alleged incomparability of traumas by representing traumas in ways that suggest commonalities between them. Foer includes also a reference to hierarchizations of suffering in Oskar's remark that his "dad died the most horrible death" (Foer 201). Third, *Great House* relies on the literary juxtaposition of the Holocaust with other collective historical traumas to question its incomparability and hence follows the approaches Foer and McCann chose. Moreover, Krauss' novel includes stories that put forward the idea of connecting memories of traumatic events in general and thereby introduces a discussion of the links between traumas on a meta-level.

Also the text-immanent evaluation of establishing links between traumas differs between the novels. *What You Owe Me* depicts an unexpected friendship and blooming business partnership as deriving from the characters' similar suffering in the past, and underlines the common cultural heritage of Black Americans and Jewish Americans. These positive connotations are not absolute, however, since Gilda sacrifices the friendship when she realizes the differences between herself and Hosanna, i.e. the economic and social possibilities from which she can only benefit without her Black friend. *Let the Great World Spin* offers a positive assessment of the links it establishes between traumas: Here, too, two women form a

friendship across racial and social boundaries when they are connected in a network of traumas via the shared traumatic loss of their sons. Moreover, the novel's conflation of time reveals to the reader parallels between 1974 and the aftermath of 9/11, the Vietnam War and US-reactions to the terrorist attacks. *Great House* trades the benefits of connecting different traumatic memories off against its drawbacks. On the content level, a negative outcome emerges: for Lotte the merging of the deeds of the military dictatorship in Chile with her Holocaust memories results in an emotional crisis, and also Dovik's suffering is increased when his war trauma is related to the Holocaust memories of his fellow soldier's father. On the meta-level, to which the stories of the Great House and the shark contribute, *Great House* puts forward the idea that connecting traumas can have temporary and long-lasting positive effects on the victims. Foer's novel offers only very slight hints with regard to the effects of juxtaposing traumas: The unmediated confrontation of New Yorker children with the bombing of Hiroshima in the aftermath of 9/11 has a devastating effect on them. By contrast, Oskar's realization that he is surrounded by fellow sufferers gives him a feeling of safety and makes him disavow easy comparisons and hierarchies of whose death was the most horrible (Foer 201). The novel thus suggests that the juxtaposition of trauma needs a certain form to be unharmed and raise awareness of elements connecting victims of traumatization. All novels, except *What You Owe Me*, broach the role of imagination in producing or revealing links between traumas, but only *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* questions systematically the call for the truthfulness of trauma representation with its combination of magic realist and psychogeographical elements.

By juxtaposing several collective historical traumas in the realm of one novel, the authors of *What You Owe Me*, *Great House*, *Let the Great World Spin*, and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* defy notions of the incomparability of traumas. By making Hattie's belief in the contest of victims appear in a bad light and connecting two of the main characters in a friendship based on shared experiences of trauma, *What You Owe Me* criticizes discourses on hierarchies of victims or contests of victimization especially frankly. In the novels, the benefits of producing – or highlighting existing – links outweigh negative aspects. The representational choices of the authors foreground commonalities between the traumas dealt with and avoid comparisons which could qualify one trauma as more traumatizing or horrible than another one. Instead, human suffering that is for the most part caused by other human beings emerges as the most significant link between traumas, characters, and humanity in general. The novels emphasize common causes of suffering, like torture techniques or bombings, recurring psychological and

bodily repercussions, like symptoms of PTSD, and all novels, but *Let the Great World Spin* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* in particular, send a clear moral message warning of political decisions that continue to cause suffering. This point is especially in Foer's and Krauss' novels underlined by showing how groups can turn from victims into perpetrators and vice versa. The underlying assumption of all novels appears to be that once characters, readers and victims see the commonalities the novels show more or less explicitly, hierarchizations of suffering are precluded and the question of how to avoid the suffering comes to the fore.

Novels dealing with several traumas have to face the reproach of eliminating or ignoring historical, cultural, and individual specifics of traumatic experiences. It is hence important to note that none of the novels suggests that everybody is traumatized and that all experiences of trauma are similar. In the novels, the collective historical traumas dealt with always remain specific as does the individual suffering of the characters. Flannery sums up the effects of highlighting painful commonalities in *Let the Great World Spin*: "the novel de-monumentalizes the suffering of the victims of 9/11, without denigrating their memory. Instead, McCann showcases the longevity and the breadth of human suffering and resilience" (Flannery, "Internationalizing" 306). I would argue that all novels of my study follow this approach to "de-monumentalize" the collective historical traumas dealt with, and especially the Holocaust, without minimizing the painful impact on those involved. By highlighting similarities and relations between different collective historical traumas, the novels rather acknowledge the multitude of painful experiences without reducing their respective impacts. They call for mutual understanding and empathy as foundations for dialog and joined efforts to end suffering.

## 7.2. Future Research

In 2018, eight years after the publication of *Great House*, trauma is still a major concern not only of US-American but also of novels published in Europe. To name just two examples, the 2018 Man Booker Prize Shortlist includes two novels dealing with collective historical traumas: Scottish author Robin Robertson's *The Long Take* depicts "the slaughterhouse that was the coast of Normandy in the summer of 1944" (Banville), and Canadian author Esi Edugyan's *Washington Black* represents slavery on a Barbados plantation. However, these texts represent only one collective historical trauma. Novels dealing with several traumas have not become a pronounced strand of trauma literature (yet). The topics they broach, such as the links between slavery and the Holocaust or the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, are

nonetheless still of significance as movies like *The Butler* or *Disturbing the Peace*, a documentary which traces the joined effort of former enemies – Israeli soldiers and Palestinian fighters – to establish a common ground for peace, show. It might hence be true that the novels analyzed in this study reflect a change that has set in since the beginning of the millennium. We might see discourses about collective memory and especially collective trauma which begin to question strictly separated considerations of single collective traumas and the discourses claiming such a separation by looking for elements linking traumatic memories and testing what new or deeper understandings might arise from the connection.

The intertextual references that link the novels by Krauss, Foer, and McCann suggest that the authors position their novels deliberately in a shared strand of literature dealing with several traumas. As the movie *The Butler* shows, establishing relations between at least two collective historical traumas is still a topic in US-culture. Novels dealing with more than one collective historical trauma are still few and far between, however. It is thus hard to say if the juxtaposition of traumas is a trend that will last and expand or if it will remain marginal or even die off completely. The short list of The Man Booker Prize 2018 illustrates in any event that collective historical traumas continue to be a major concern of contemporary novels in English.

My analyses have brought to the fore several starting points for subsequent studies: For practical reasons, this study concentrates on four novels. As I have reflected above, despite my attempt to include novels by authors from different backgrounds and dealing with different collective historical traumas, significant collective historical traumas are absent from these novels. Future research on novels representing several traumas should hence aim at including novels, such as Yamashita's *I Hotel*, that offer further perspectives by dealing with other traumas and – presumably – applying different representational strategies.

In addition, a comparative analysis of novels such as Caryl Phillip's *The Nature of Blood* from 1997 and Boualem Sansal's *Le Village de l'Allemand ou Le Journal des Frères Schiller* from 2008 could offer insights with regard to the important question of how non-American (and also explicitly non-'Western') authors represent a plurality of traumas. Phillips' novel deals with the Holocaust and slavery, colonialism, and antisemitism in 15<sup>th</sup> century Venice in an experimental style that rests not only on different voices and uses highly fragmented narrative but also includes encyclopedic glosses, for example. Sansal juxtaposes the Algerian War, racism in contemporary France and the Holocaust in the fictional diaries of two French-Algerian brothers who trace their father's Nazi past. These two novels hence deal with traumas embraced by the

novels of this study and, moreover, mix genres and literary styles. A comparative analysis could answer the question whether the development of a multitraumata literature in the USA reflects an emerging global trend which in times of the ubiquity of collective traumas has to deal with questions of equitable representation by finding ways to break with traditional paradigms and hierarchies of center vs. periphery, Orient vs. Occident, colonizer vs. colonized etc.

The examples from Rothberg's study show that between 1949 and 1961 the juxtaposition of traumas was accepted in scholarly discourses (*Multidirectional* 107). It would hence be possible to conduct a diachronic comparative analysis of main traumas dealt with, literary strategies applied and effects produced in these texts, contemporary texts, and those situated in-between, like *The Nature of Blood*, and to carve out differences that might result from the emergence of the Holocaust as measuring rod and the establishment of literary trauma studies.

Another field of study that arose from my analyses is the intersection between trauma, and trauma representation respectively, and gender. Several questions are worth consideration: Is it a mere coincidence that in the novels analyzed in this study twice women bond over traumatization but never men? From this question derives another point of inquiry: Do female characters suffer differently from trauma than male characters? The novels do not suggest significant differences in their depiction of symptoms of PTSD but a slight difference with regard to the capacity of overcoming trauma can be detected: In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, for example, Oskar's mother and grandmother seem to have less trouble to move on after 9/11 and World War II than Oskar and especially his grandfather. In *Great House*, too, Dovik, Aaron, Weisz and Yoav are depicted as incapable of "passing over it" whereas Leah acts to breach the crippling relationship to her father and leave the self-imposed prison. In *Let the Great World Spin*, Claire and the other mothers actively search for company whereas Claire's husband relies on repression to deal with his traumatization. The depiction of the female characters in *What You Owe Me* confirms this trend. Of the two female characters Hosanna is initially the more active one. She urges Gilda to see a dentist and go to a tattoo parlor to remove the marks the concentration camp left on her body. She is also the driving force in their business plans motivated by the loss of her family's land and the urge to succeed nonetheless. Once Gilda has realized that Hosanna's approach improves her life, she, too, engages in business and leisure activities. The depiction of Gilda and Hosanna as traumatized and their struggles to succeed economically evokes a complex of further exploratory questions: Can gender under certain circumstances be considered a trauma? Is this trauma reflected in

trauma novels? And does it influence the representation of other traumas? Helene Moglen affirms in her study *The Trauma of Gender: A Feminist Theory of the English Novel* that the British novel of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century reflected the sex-gender system and also contributed to the demands on femininity that were in her reading traumatizing for women. In *What You Owe Me*, Hosanna is depicted as being discriminated against because of her skin color and because of her sex (Campbell 458), and Gilda depends on her uncle for money. Arguably, the subtext of gender inequality impacts the characters' traumatization – an insight that needs further examination and should be considered in the analysis of other trauma novels.

My analyses were exploratory due to the almost complete absence of studies that examine the phenomenon of the juxtaposition of traumas in novels in depth. The realization that neither literary trauma theory nor more recently proposed approaches, like Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory, can thoroughly account for connections between traumas established in novels and thus exclude significant aspects from the analysis, made it necessary to look for and apply concepts from other disciplines. The close readings of the novels and the subsequent search for suitable concepts revealed two concepts which might be fruitfully applied to analyze at least one, if not several, of the novels of this study. Reading *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, a special type of space appears repeatedly, the in-between space that does not belong to any of the places it borders on but does not constitute a place by itself. Examples are the airport and the "part of the bridge that isn't any borough" (Foer 316). From this realization the question arises if concepts of hybrid spaces or contact zones could help trace connections between traumas. One possible approach would be to examine whether the fluidity of time and space which links 9/11 and the bombing of Dresden and/or the quoted in-between spaces in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* produce a Thirdspace in which traumas from different times and places meet. Edward W. Soja's concept of Thirdspace could be combined with Lotman's concept of the *Grenzgänger* (border crosser). Oskar could be considered a liminal character in Lotman's sense whose acts of walking, connecting (traumatized) people and breaking scientific rules (rewinding time) and social taboos (presenting an interview with a survivor of Hiroshima to children shortly after 9/11) brings separate spheres into contact with each other and, ultimately, creates a traumatic Thirdspace. Probing postcolonial concepts of contact zones in the analysis of Foer's trauma representations could finally pave the way for a comparative analysis of texts that deal with traumas from non-western contexts.

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