1

Worlds of Hurt

Reading the Literatures of Trauma

The fact that a situation is ubiquitous does not absolve us from examining it. On the contrary, we must examine it for the very reason that it is or can be the fate of each and every one of us.

– Alice Miller[1]

Daughter: What does "objective" mean?
Father: Well. It means that you look very hard at those things which you choose to look at.

– Gregory Bateson[2]

On December 1, 1991, Elie Wiesel presented former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger with the Elie Wiesel Remembrance Award. The Award honors individuals who survived the Holocaust, "and then somehow contributed – through their work, writing, art, or philanthropy – to the welfare of the Jewish people and humanity."[3] The announcement of the awards ceremony, which took place at a State of Israel Bonds dinner, appeared in the "Chronicle" column of the *New York Times.* It merited only a short paragraph in the back pages of the paper, and seemed, on the surface, entirely unremarkable – a simple case of Nobel Prize winners patting each other on the back, famous men gathering together to praise one another.

Elie Wiesel is a professional Holocaust survivor. Beginning with the publication of his autobiographical novel, *Night* (1960), and continuing through his long career as an author and activist, Wiesel has promoted the memory of the genocidal campaign waged by the Nazis against the Jews. Terrence Des Pres, who has written in strong support of Wiesel's work, noted, "As a survivor and a witness [Wiesel] is accorded a respect bordering on reverence."[4] Throughout his career Wiesel has confirmed his belief that the survivor–witness bears a terrible burden – a duty to both the living and the dead

to testify, to tell the world of the horrors he has seen. At the same time, Wiesel believes, testimony is never adequate, that it can never bridge the gap between language and experience: "Could the wall be scaled? Could the reader be brought to the other side? I knew the answer to be No, and yet I also knew that No had to become Yes."[5] Wiesel has long insisted that "those who have not lived through the experience will never know,"[6] and he laments the days when discussion of the Holocaust was "still in the domain of sacred memory, was considered taboo, reserved for the initiates. . . ."[7]

Henry Kissinger emigrated from Germany to the United States in 1938 with his parents and his brother. Kissinger was 15 years old when he departed Europe for America, and he never experienced the hardships of the ghettos or concentration camps of the Third Reich. His claim to the title of "Holocaust survivor" derives from the fact that 26 members of his family were killed at Auschwitz. Such broad inclusiveness calls into question the value of the categorical distinction, since so many American Jews might also qualify as "survivors."

The irony of Elie Wiesel designating Henry Kissinger – who wasn't "there" – a fellow survivor is heightened by Kissinger's involvement in another genocidal campaign, one which Wiesel publicly deplored. Wiesel visited Cambodia in 1980 and wrote of his sympathy for the victims of the Pol Pot regime: "How could a Jew like myself, with experiences and memories like mine, stay at home and not go to the aid of an entire people? . . . As a Jew I felt the need to tell these despairing men and women that we understood them; that we shared their pain; that we understood their distress because we remembered a time when we as Jews confronted total indifference. . . ."[8] By 1980 it was generally accepted in reputable academic and intellectual circles that the campaign waged by Nixon and Kissinger to bomb Cambodia back into the Stone Age had destabilized the Cambodian government and caused the political and economic upheaval that enabled the Khmer Rouge to seize power.[9]

Though Wiesel's decision to grant Kissinger honorary survivor status does not mark the first occasion Wiesel has chosen to engage in morally questionable public behavior (at the height of the Gulf War he honored George Bush with a humanitarian award on behalf of the B'nai B'rith) it is certainly the first time that he has bestowed the title of survivor on someone who spent the years of the Nazi regime in such comfortable circumstances. It seems to me that Wiesel has, finally, completely ungrounded himself. For if Henry Kissinger is a survivor, what then is Elie Wiesel? The difference between the two men is now, apparently, only a matter of degree – a question of which one survived "worse" horrors.

I begin with the story of Wiesel and Kissinger because it illustrates the problem which lies at the heart of this book. In order to understand the implications of Wiesel's action, we must look backwards to the time before his

connection to the Holocaust went unsaid. We must remember that Elie Wiesel was not always already Elie Wiesel. We must do this even though the best and the brightest of the critics of Holocaust literature warn us against it:

> To read a book by Elie Wiesel is one thing; to read it with knowledge of the man as a survivor and a witness, and further to read it with at least some knowledge of the ghettos, the cattle cars, and the killing centers, is another, very different experience. . . . Much of the time the full impact of his prose depends on knowing *who* is speaking and *what* he is speaking of, while neither is actually clarified.[10]

How does one learn "who" Wiesel is, and gain "some" knowledge of the Holocaust? And which "who" and which "some" are the right ones? During and immediately after the Holocaust, information and testimony came from thousands of survivors and witnesses (like Wiesel himself, who was not yet already "Elie Wiesel"). There were many voices and none of them were famous yet. By what process was Wiesel selected from ten thousand others? How did Wiesel become the "who" he is, the voice of "the" survivor?

These questions about Elie Wiesel raise deeper questions: What is the connection between individual psychic trauma and cultural representations of the traumatic event? What does the act of testimony, of "bearing witness" mean to an individual survivor, to a community of survivors? How are testimonies interpreted by different audiences? What does the designation "survivor" mean, and who has the right to confer that title? What happens when a survivor's story is retold (and revised) by a writer who is not a survivor? How are survivor's stories adapted to fit and then contained within the dominant structure of social, cultural and political discourse?

It is difficult to articulate such questions, and impossible to answer them within the framework of traditional academic disciplines. I draw from a wide variety of methodological approaches and use the analytic techniques devised by scholars in "area" studies – women's studies, African-American studies, Holocaust studies, and cultural studies. In such interdisciplinary work, boundaries are fluid and context becomes all-important. This is not, therefore, a study of *all* survivors in *all* circumstances. I do not believe in universally applicable, "normative" models. I am an Americanist, with a specialty in post-World War II culture in the United States, and I draw my examples from that place and that time.

This study focuses on three distinct traumatic events, and their representation in contemporary U.S. culture: the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, and sexual abuse of women and children. On the face of it, this may appear an outrageous comparison – as if, perhaps, I chose my subject matter on the basis of its sensational nature. This is not the case. My awareness of the connections between these events has evolved gradually, and sometimes painfully over a period of years. My decision to complete this book was made with full

knowledge of its controversial nature. My aim is to force readers to question
the "sacred" nature of the Holocaust as subject matter, to encourage them to
be critical of the recent tendency to elevate the American veteran of the
Vietnam War to the status of "hero," and to acknowledge the existence of an
ongoing campaign of sexual violence and oppression waged by many men
against the women and children of the United States.

In addition to insisting on the importance of contextualizing my subjects,
I believe that it is only fair to the reader to provide enough information for
her to place *me* in context. In the words of Holocaust scholar Philip Hallie:

> My way of understanding good and evil . . . involves proper names and
> particular circumstances, and a felt obligation to look closely at these.
> One of those proper names is my own. Narratives need narrators, and
> storytellers have much to do with the nature and style of their stories.
> For me, ethics is partly a matter of autobiography, partly a matter of
> history and philosophy. Personal candor is part of narrative ethics for
> me.[11]

In addition to the public information on my curriculum vitae, I feel the
following facts are important for my reader to know.[12]

I was born in 1960. I am a white woman. I am a Jew, born of Jewish
parents, and brought up in their completely secular household. I was raised
in a multiethnic, multiracial extended family – my mother's father divorced
his Jewish wife and married my Episcopalian Puerto Rican step-grandmother,
who was already the mother of several children from her previous marriage.
Through my many uncles and aunts, who were often present in our home,
I was exposed to elements of Puerto Rican and black culture, as well as to the
ways in which racism is manifested in a close-knit multiracial family. I was
sexually abused as a twelve-year-old by adult friends of my maternal grand-
father. My sexual identification is primarily heterosexual. I was raised in an
upper-class environment, with all of the privileges that entails.

I have offered the reader this information not in the spirit of confession or
testimony, but in the attempt to live up to the standards set by other feminist
critics, such as African-American theorist Valerie Smith, who suggests that "if
those of us working on the connections between race, class, and gender in
cultural productions acknowledge the relation of our theoretical work to our
personal circumstances, then we will be able to expand the radical possibilities
of our scholarship."[13] I consider it necessary not only to admit, but to *define*
my subjectivity – such a definition seems to me to make the sort of Gramscian
"good sense" that political scientist Joan Cocks describes:

> Good sense is thought that is self-knowing . . . It is self-critical. . . . It
> is finally . . . self-active, fashioning its own independent world-view,
> and working to make that view systematic, unified, and rigorous. . . .

> The cultivation of such self-knowing, self-critical, self-active thought is
> . . . a preliminary condition for people giving a conscious direction to
> their own activities and taking "an active part in the creation of world
> history."[14]

Like Cocks, I believe that "cultural–political theory inquires primarily into consciously lived life"[15] and that such an inquiry "makes its major moves back and forth between some individual train of thought or action or sensibility and the larger, collective political and cultural world."[16] Any act of cultural criticism, in this estimation, ought to be a self-conscious act – one in which the critic acknowledges that her choice of subject has meaning, and that a choice of subject is itself open to interpretation. As Des Pres observed, "There are always, for any subject under the sun, worldly conditions to be met – social, political, cultural – when asking: Why this event? At some point, also, one must ask: Why me?"[17] I have attempted to make this question – Why me? – integral to my approach.

I believe that the responsibility of the cultural critic is to present a continuous challenge to the assumptions upon which any communal consensus is based – to insist that nothing go without saying. When cultural critics seek to expose and then question the rationales for specific community practices, we situate ourselves in opposition to dominant discourse. We question our own beliefs, and the beliefs of others. We appeal to people's "good sense," and we measure our success by the amount of argument we generate. We actively work towards the breakdown of consensus, at which point, "assumptions that could previously be taken for granted become one set of theories among others, ideas that you have to *argue for* rather than presuppose as given."[18] Such a process is not infinitely reductive, nor does it promote the notion that all theories are equally valid.

Unlike the most playful of the deconstructionists, we do not seek to prove that there is, finally, no solid place to stand. We have moved beyond the discovery of the reductive power of the question "why?" Every human being possesses a core set of beliefs rooted in faith. Cultural critics seek to establish a mode of discourse in which each person can first uncover and acknowledge his or her beliefs, and then test them, compare them to the beliefs of others, understand their implications, and modify them to reflect a changing understanding of the world. Our end goal is a community based on the full and informed participation of all its members – a community where difference is not only accepted but cherished because it provides us with new frames of reference and new ways of understanding ourselves.

The subject of this work is psychic trauma; its cultural–political inquiry moves back and forth between the effects of trauma upon individual survivors and the manner in which that trauma is reflected and revised in the larger, collective political and cultural world. In the cases of the Holocaust, the

Vietnam War, and the campaign of sexual violence waged against women and children, I examine three strategies of cultural coping – mythologization, medicalization, and disappearance. Mythologization works by reducing a traumatic event to a set of standardized narratives (twice- and thrice-told tales that come to represent "the story" of the trauma) turning it from a frightening and uncontrollable event into a contained and predictable narrative. Medicalization focuses our gaze upon the victims of trauma, positing that they suffer from an "illness" that can be "cured" within existing or slightly modified structures of institutionalized medicine and psychiatry. Disappearance – a refusal to admit to the existence of a particular kind of trauma – is usually accomplished by undermining the credibility of the victim. In the traumas I examine, these strategies work in combination to effect the cultural codification of the trauma.

Traumatic events are written and rewritten until they become codified and narrative form gradually replaces content as the focus of attention. For example, the Holocaust has become a metonym, *not* for the actual series of events that occurred in Germany and the occupied territories before and during World War II, but for the set of symbols that reflect the formal codification of that experience. There is a recognizable set of literary and filmic conventions that comprise the "Holocaust" text. These conventions are so well defined that they may be reproduced in endless recombination to provide us with a steady stream of additions to the genre:

> [I]n the minds of some, the "Holocaust Novel" may now be seen as an available subgenre of contemporary fiction, to be written by anyone who is on to and can master the "formula." . . . [Readers of this literature] will be taken rather swiftly and effortlessly through the whole "pattern": the prewar normalcy and the coming of trouble; the beginning of a propaganda campaign against the Jews and racial and religious incitement against them; the incipient threats at first against a few, and then openly against the many; the bureaucratization of terror and the growing "banality of evil"; the exploitation of slave labor and the emergence of the child smugglers; the omnipresent disease and hunger; the imposed quotas; the strikes and other temporary shows of resistance; the roundups and transports; the camps; the corpses; and a few survivors. None of this is "easy," but neither is it beyond the reach of a competent writer.[19]

Once codified, the traumatic experience becomes a weapon in another battle, the struggle for political power. "The role of political power," as Foucault explains, ". . . is perpetually to re-inscribe this relation through a form of unspoken warfare; to re-inscribe it in social institutions, in economic inequalities, in language, in the bodies themselves of each and every one of us."[20]

The speech of survivors, then, is highly politicized. If "telling it like it was" threatens the status quo, powerful political, economic, and social forces will pressure survivors either to keep their silence or to revise their stories. If the survivor community is a marginal one, their voices will be drowned out by those with the influence and resources to silence them, and to trumpet a revised version of their trauma. Less marginal trauma survivors can sometimes band together as a community and retain a measure of control over the representation of their experience. Much of my work focuses upon the interaction between the survivor as individual, the community of survivors, and the wielders of political power.

Bearing witness is an aggressive act. It is born out of a refusal to bow to outside pressure to revise or to repress experience, a decision to embrace conflict rather than conformity, to endure a lifetime of anger and pain rather than to submit to the seductive pull of revision and repression. Its goal is change. The battle over the meaning of a traumatic experience is fought in the arena of political discourse, popular culture, and scholarly debate. The outcome of this battle shapes the rhetoric of the dominant culture and influences future political action.

If survivors retain control over the interpretation of their trauma, they can sometimes force a shift in the social and political structure. If the dominant culture manages to appropriate the trauma and can codify it in its own terms, the status quo will remain unchanged. On a social as well as an individual psychological level, the penalty for repression is repetition. In Daniel Goleman's words: "On the one hand, we forget we have done this before and, on the other, do not quite realize what we are doing again. The self-deception is complete."[21]

The Holocaust serves as a paradigm case, demonstrating the appropriation and codification of a traumatic event. Des Pres writes, "At some unconscious level, the image of the Holocaust is with us – a memory which haunts, a sounding board for all subsequent evil – in the back of the mind . . . for all of us now living: we, the inheritors."[22] What is "with us," however, is not the memory of the massive and complex set of historical and cultural events that comprised the Third Reich, but rather a distilled and reified set of images for which "Holocaust" has become the metonym. "Holocaust" is a signifier for, among other things, the Nazi genocidal campaign against the Jews; the reign of evil upon the face of the earth; and the rationale for the existence of the State of Israel. Drawn from religious terminology and spelled with a capital "H," the term Holocaust is set apart from descriptions of other man-made evils, such as slavery, genocide, and oppression. A proper noun, its uniqueness is emphasized every time it is named. Yet, as literary critic James Young observes, it is "ironic that once an event is perceived to be without precedent, without adequate analogy, it would in itself become a kind of precedent for all that follows: a new figure against which subsequent experiences are mea-

sured and grasped. . . . The process is inevitable, for as new experiences are necessarily grasped and represented in the frame of remembered past experiences, 'incomparable' experiences like the Holocaust will always be made – at least rhetorically – comparable."[23]

The force of the Holocaust as precedent and yardstick to measure trauma in contemporary U.S. culture, and the influence of the Holocaust survivor on the perceived legitimacy and interpretation of the statements of survivors of other traumas has never, to my knowledge, been discussed in print before. To seriously undertake such a project, we must disregard the cultural prohibition against profaning the sacred. We must demystify the Holocaust, reducing it, once again, to a series of historical and cultural events on par with other cultural and historical events and therefore undeserving of a capital "H," except as a sort of casual shorthand, as we speak of the Enlightenment, or the Renaissance. With Miriam Greenspan, I believe that "The view of the Holocaust as Sacred Event . . . goes along with a decided ignorance of the forces of fascism and anti-Semitism, not only as they existed in World War II Europe, but as they exist in the world today."[24] However unpopular, I consider it imperative to reduce the Holocaust from "holy object" to "something which happened in history"[25] if we are to understand, for example, exactly what George Bush meant when he called Saddam Hussein "another Hitler," and why this naming seemed to serve as a justification for going to war against Iraq.[26] How has the "Holocaust" been invoked and represented in the U.S.? What is the interaction between the Holocaust survivor and mainstream U.S. culture? What is implied when Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel presents Hitler-invoking George Bush with a humanitarian award at the peak of Bush's war against Iraq?

As I have grappled with these questions, I have discovered that it is imperative to make a distinction between those individuals who have been traumatized in a particular way and those individuals who have not suffered such traumatization. I have also found it necessary to make distinctions between members of groups subject to systematic traumatization, and members of groups not subject to such persecution, as well as to account for movement from one group to another, or simultaneous membership in two or more groups. I have tried to create a coherent structure for analyzing different sociocultural patterns of traumatization and reassimilation, and to account for complex social relationships.

In a social system that supports the systematic oppression and persecution of a particular minority group (such as Jews in Nazi Germany), the victims of persecution have a limited set of available options. They may capitulate, which will result in continued suffering and perhaps the eventual death of all members of the targeted group if the intent of the oppressor is genocide. They may resist by appealing to existing legal, moral, or ethical structures in the dominant society (i.e., litigation, religious arguments) and use tactics such as

passive resistance or nonviolence. They may respond with force – intending to change the power structure. Or they may attempt to escape the confines of the oppressive social structure, either by relocating to a less hostile environment or by "passing" as a member of a nontargeted group.[27]

Within a society, there may be several targeted groups, whose members are subject to traumatization in greater or lesser degrees. Targeted groups can and should be examined both in relation to the dominant group and to each other. In the United States, Jews are only one of several targeted groups. Though discriminated against, Jews do not suffer from violent racism or systematic economic oppression. Other targeted groups – women and racial minorities, for example – are at higher risk of traumatic assault.

Membership in the targeted group is determined on the basis of externally imposed definitions (i.e., race, class, gender, religious affiliation), which are created and enforced by dominant social groups, and which – once created – are often internalized by members of targeted groups and incorporated into their individual self-concepts. A characteristic of targeting is that persons falling within the dominant group's definition are subject to the same treatment, whether or not their self-definition includes membership in the targeted group. For example, Jews and Gypsies in Nazi Germany were targeted based on "blood" relationships defined by the Nazis and in the Nuremberg Race Laws. In the U.S. (both in the antebellum South and, in many states, into the 1960s) blackness was also determined by ancestry. Self-definition played no role in such social classification.

In a situation of ongoing oppression or involving the risk of traumatic violence, many members of a targeted group will be victimized (some repeatedly), while other members will escape physical harm. In such circumstances, the category of trauma "survivor" is problematic, since every traumatized member of an oppressed community is aware of the potential for repeated victimization. Where there is no safe refuge, the designation of "survivor" is always temporary and conditional. Jews and Gypsies in Nazi Germany existed in a state of ongoing oppression. Jews in America are no longer members of a community at risk. Soldiers were at risk in Vietnam, but veterans are not targets of systematic violence in the United States. Women and children in the U.S. comprise a community under siege.

Most readers will accept the notion that Jews and Gypsies are members of oppressed groups. Many others readers will be familiar with and supportive of feminist arguments that women and children also belong in this category. However, the mechanism by which soldiers are systematically exposed to traumatic assault and then reassimilated into U.S. society as veterans requires more explication.

During the Vietnam war, men from both targeted and untargeted groups enlisted or were drafted, and were sent to Vietnam. Those exposed to combat or other life-threatening events, and those exposed to the carnage resulting

from combat were traumatized.[28] But combat soldiers, though subordinate to their military superiors and frequently at the mercy of their enemies, still possess a life-or-death power over other people. Much recent literature – popular, clinical, and academic – places the combat soldier simply in the victim's role; helpless in the face of war, and then helpless to readjust from the war experience upon his return home. Feminist critics should be quick to voice their disapproval of an interpretation so drastically at odds with reality. The soldier in combat is both victim and victimizer; dealing death as well as risking it. These soldiers carry guns; they point them at people and shoot to kill. Members of oppressed groups, by contrast, almost never control the tools of violence.

The fact that the "community" of combat soldiers exists only during wartime, and that these veterans of the U.S. war in Vietnam returned to a society that did not view them as a distinct, targeted group did not prevent them from voluntarily associating. American survivors of the Vietnam war formed a new, self-defined group – the Vietnam war veterans[29] – based upon their common traumatic experience. They identified themselves as distinct not only from civilians, but from veterans of previous wars, founding their own organizations and often refusing to join the large, "inclusive" traditional veterans organizations such as the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Posttraumatic group identification is sometimes quite strong. However, over time it tends to deteriorate, especially when membership in the post-trauma group spans both targeted and nontargeted groups in contemporary society. Current group interests and status will increasingly take precedence over survivor group identification. As group cohesiveness diminishes, social and political pressures upon the survivor group begin to take their toll on members. This process can be traced in the history of Vietnam War veteran associations, which began with the formation of the radical Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) in 1967.[30]

As the number of American soldiers in Vietnam decreased in the early 1970s, membership in the VVAW (along with antiwar activism in general) waned. In the mid-1970s the shrinking VVAW was shattered by an ideological battle between radical and liberal members. After a contested election in 1978 and a lawsuit between feuding parties, the energies of both sides were exhausted. The liberal wing won the right to use the VVAW name, and the much diminished radical wing was granted the appellation VVAW-AI (Anti-Imperialist). Both groups were quickly overshadowed by the new Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA), founded in 1978 by Robert Muller. Since the late 1980s VVA has itself split into two organizations – Muller left VVA because he resisted its increasing conservatism and founded the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation. This secession also initiated a lawsuit, which left the VVA with the bulk of the funding and pauperized VVAF. Today the VVA has