Traumatic Responses in a Postmodern City

Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close (3)
Outline

I. Theoretical Preamble
   – Trauma and Contemporary Literature
II. Trauma & the City [its people, sites, monument and collective grief]
Trauma: the Unrepresentable

1) **The Sublime**: Frank Ankersmit: “trauma can be seen as the psychological counterpart of the sublime, and the sublime can be seen as the philosophical counterpart of trauma” (2005, 338 qtd in Nadal, et al 3).

2). **Time**: Just as the sublime transcends time, linking past, present and future, trauma disrupts the mind's experience of time, so the subject endlessly wavers between the present and "a primary experience that can never be captured" (Luckhurst 2008, 5).

→ Anna’s death, Goldberg’s whereabout, Father’s death
Trauma: Deferred Action & Realism

1. Inaccessibility of trauma → repetitive. Ubiquitous and (“that night has no beginning or end, it started before I was born and it's still happening” 208)

2. Michael Rothberg: "traumatic realism is "a form of documentation and historical cognition attuned to the demands of extremity"; in it, it demands claims of reference live on, but so does the traumatic extremity that disables realist representation as usual" (2000, 14)

3. → city as archive: the buildings, photos, books, letters: buried/burned, but not buried
Trauma and Literature

- Despite “irredeemable losses“ (Roth 2012, 85), and even if literature may suggest the ambivalence of the archive, “the literary (or even art in general) is a prime, if not the privileged, place for giving voice to trauma as well as symbolically exploring the role of excess” (LaCapra 2001, 190).4

- Trauma fiction mimics the structure of trauma: it portrays the undecidability of the traumatic and, therefore, remains suspended "between its attempt to convey the literality of a specific event and its figurative evocation of the symptomatic response to trauma through formal and stylistic innovation" (Whitehead 2004, 162). Considering “the narrative/anti-narrative tension at the core of trauma,“ Luckhurst foregrounds the suspension quality of the literary by evoking Derrida's approach to literature (Nadal, et al, 7-8).

→ All the three characters: trying to tell stories.
As Caruth argues, trauma may lead to an ethical encounter with the other, or echoing Lacan, to “an ethical relation to the real” (1996, 18, 8, 102).

In Trauma and Recovery, psychiatrist Judith Herman concludes that “Resolution of the trauma is never final; recovery is never complete”; “trauma is redeemed only when it becomes the source of a survivor mission” (2001, 211, 207). (Nadal, et al, 8)

→ Encounter with “the real” yes;
→ w./ the ethnic others?
→ never final, never complete
Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close

Oskar’s Communication with & Understanding of the City
Grandparents’ places of fixation and communication

– The shed in Dresden/the house in New York (Nothing vs. Something places)
– the airport, train station, zoo – non-places turned into “place”
Discussion Questions

1. What progress does Oskar make in his communication with his grandparents and his mother?
2. What (allegorical) meanings can we find from Oskar’s visits of the Blacks?
3. Meaning of the ending?
Discussion Questions (2)

The functions of images & letters – floating signifiers or media of expression & communication?

- The birds, the falling man (205)
  - fantasies vs. liberation and “Somebody”

- Letters
  - (Oskar’s and Abby Black’s father-in-law’s)

- Oskar’s picture book
  - floating signifiers vs. understanding of the tragedy [death & inability to fly] in the context of human history

- Happiness, Happiness
  - “A rose is a rose is a rose”: equation of meaning vs. association & narrativization
Oskar’s Attempts at Communication: With Inevitable Failure & Partial Understanding

1) The 6th message – unanswered (Are you there?)
2) Searching for the lock for the father’s key, only to find that it’s a key given to W. Black by his father → another failure in father-son communication
3) Writing letters – (to his French teacher, to a zoologist, donation to American Diabetes Foundation, to a taxi driver, Stephen Hawking)
4) Inventing things as means for communication – fantasies (like the ending of his picture book and this book)
5) Working on his picture book – can be floating signifiers
Communication:
Oskar’s “raison d’être”: firm basis of his self-reconstruction

– raison d’être
– Entomology (a sophisticated child quick in learning things) p. 1
– Making her (mother) happy, protecting her p. 7; p. 68
– the lock ultimate raison d’être 69
– Not hurting her (grandma) 100
Partial Understanding: Oskar about Grandmother

Re. Grandma:

– Not hurting her.
– Once she loses him. pp. 101- “Don’t go away.”
– I always think about how I could have told her the truth then. (105)
– [Grandma] "That's sad. That's so sad." I thought about the unfinished scarf, and the rock she carried across Broadway, and how she had lived so much life but still needed imaginary friends, and the one thousand thumb wars. [144]
Oskar about Grandmother

– We spent so much time together. I don’t think there’s anyone that I spent more time with, at least not since Dad died, unless you count Buckminster. But there were a lot of people that I knew better. For example, I didn’t know anything about what it was like when she was a kid, or how she met Grandpa, or what their marriage was like, or why he left. If I had to write her life story, all I could say is that her husband could talk to animals, and that I should never love anything as much as she loved me. So here’s my question: What were we spending so much time doing if not getting to know each other. (105) → possibilities for more understanding via the letters, if sent
Oskar helping & being helped by Grandpa

– Oskar tells Thomas his story as if he were the grandmother. 238
– Oskar’s turning point and then the idea gets “closer” and “louder” 259
– their trip to the cemetery – faces the truth, and releases Grandpa’s burden
Oskar’s Initial Communication w/ mother

- “lies” p. 38 -
- His obsession with “black” (107)
  - not wanting to know about her dreams
  - storage facility
- Oskar’s confrontation with his mother
  - Burial –death: "He had cells, and now they're on rooftops, and in the river, and in the lungs of millions of people around New York, [169]
- Mood changes –1) bidet, electronic fences
  - 2) "You think because I laugh every now and then I don't miss Dad?”[171] "If I could have chosen, I would have chosen you!"
Realization that her mother knew all the way through 291

All of a sudden I understood why, when Mom asked where I was going, and I said 'Out,' she didn't ask any more questions. She didn't have to, because she knew.

Tells her that she can marry again.
Oskar helping and communication w/ the others

A. R. Black
B. Grandfather
C. Gerald and Peter: about their kids
Writing Letters

– To the Taxi driver (who re-gains faith in humans)
– a letter Oskar receives from Stephen Hawking “What if you never stop inventing? Maybe you're not inventing at all” 304-05
The Blacks: Collective Sorrow Individualized
Communicating with the Blacks

People in trouble
- Aaron Black – bed-ridden
- Abby Black, also helping O
- A. R. Black, also helping O
- Allen Black
- Albert Black [196] -- who wants to be an actor
- Alice Black -- nervous about Housing Authority,
- Allen Black--hates being a doorman

Trying to help Oskar
- Abe Black in Coney Island
- Ada Black

Providing clues
- Agnes Black – Feliz
- Arnold Black -- 199 – teary and couldn’t help
The Blacks’ Stories

A. R. Black
- A journalist dualist understanding of the world wars and biographical index

Ruth Black
- A woman’s fixation on floating signs of her salesman husband

William Black --gap
- A father’s inability to communicate with his son.

Fo Black & Georgia Black and her husband 239-excesses
- 1. “I love NY” 2. museumification of each other
Images of NY and its Collectivity?

– 1) imagining its multiplicity: counting the keys and locks
– 2) marking its history: Abby’s house, Edna St. Vincent Millay p. 90
– 3) mapping the city: When I was exactly halfway across the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge, I thought about how a millimeter behind me was Manhattan and a millimeter in front of me was Queens. P 88
– 4) voicing its grief: reservoir of tears; ambulance sending messages to the city dwellers
– 5) Expressing the city’s pride & fear: Empire State Building episode (244; 253)
Images of NY and its Collective Loss?

Ruth’s husband

The Sixth Borough
– The sixth borough floats away one millimeter at a time;
– Lovers connected with string and can
– Central Park salvaged,
– NYC & the 6th B-- each with a missing piece
“Tribute in Light Memorial” beams of light in 2004 (image source)
Works Cited