



**Revisiting the Trauma:
A Study of Post Cold War
Nonestablished Poetry in the Light of
Laub and LaCapra's Theories**

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Abstract

The present article focuses on the witnessing process of the admitted poets' effective responsiveness to the catastrophes they encountered; the poets to be studied, Holman, Anderson, Carman, and the number of nonpoets who cooperated with Holman in his project have been directly or indirectly traumatized by the aftermath of the Cold War in America. The analytical perspective draws on LaCapra's theories on structural and historical trauma, emphasizing Laub's witnessing level as the most significant determinant of the gestalt of interpretations. It will be followed by physical and critical phases, such as acting out and working through, coined by LaCapra, focusing on the varied poems to be scrutinized, enabling the poets' to maintain their readers' empathetic identification with their characters' predicaments in a psychoanalytic context.

Keywords: Acting out, Working through; War Poetry; Historical Trauma; Structural Trauma.

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Introduction

The present study pertains to trauma studies in literature. The researcher takes specific accounts of poetry and examines whether writing affects the trauma treatment process. Therefore, a number of poets from various generations yet similar geographical locations have been chosen. To achieve the goal of the essay, the researcher commented on the critical terms of the two pundits in trauma studies and applied them to the selected poems.

The poets of this paper were traumatized by two major catastrophes in the history of the American Cold War. A succinct overview is required to comprehend battles. As stated in *Game Theory and Postwar American Literature* (2016), “the Cold War ushered in by the erection of the Iron Curtain set firm. Nuclear equality posited the binary formulation of West-East relations, with the Iron Curtain as a manifestation of the structural and dialectical divide between the two sides” (Wainwright 52). Following the two World Wars, the Cold War was less widespread. A few instances that will be discussed in this survey are the Iraq-America War and the explosion of the Twin Towers in New York in 2001.

Although the Twin Towers explosion on 11 September, 2001, was not considered a war, it was an aftermath of the Cold War and has assuredly hurt many people physically and emotionally. This occurred as a result of Al-Quadeh’s airstrikes in four significant zones in America. The catastrophe traumatized a vast range of people. As Cohen Silver mentions in an article on the American Psychologist Magazine attack: “The attacks of 9/11 did far more than destroy buildings and kill thousands of innocent people’ (2011, 427). Many poets are included in this section, as they are all included in two 110-line poems collected by Bob Holman. The subsequent war to be studied in this article is correlated with 9/11, when George W. Bush administrated the war on Iraq in 2003; it lasted eight years and eight months until finally, the US troops were officially withdrawn in 2011. The poets assigned to this class were among the families of dead soldiers in Iraq. Ultimately, their poems are to be studied in Dori Laub’s terminology, focusing on first-level witnesses.

Literature Review

Bob Homan is imperative in today’s American poetry, initially for the advanced techniques he brought to poetry. A promoter of “performance poetry,” a Spoken-Word Poet, and an arts activist, he was also the founder of many poetry clubs. Established in 2001, Bowery Poetry is a venue for poetry, spoken words, slams, and other literary events in New York City. Likewise, Holman is the author of 17 print, audio, and video poetry collections. He was the creator and producer of the

television series *The United States of Poetry* in 1996, one of his most essential products. Generally, Holman is genuinely involved in creating universal poetry and gathering people and poets to create poetry.

Cynthia Anderson is a splendid example of a nonpoet who has written “poetry of trauma.” Indeed, she is the mother of a soldier in the Iraq-American war who penned a single, considerably long poem about her son. Unfortunately, finding resources about her background is arduous because she is not an established poet. Admitting that the positive point about this poem is that it is purely written by a person who is not a professional author, results in composing more candid poems than an established poet.

There are only three poems available by Joanna Carman: Not being an established poet, who wrote down lyrics for her brother, who died in the Iraq War. The first two poems present him as going to war, and the last one can be considered an elegy on his death. Subsequently, considering the fact that Carman only wrote these poems to display her emotions or heal her broken heart in a way, which in LaCapra’s terminology is called “working through,” the outcome incorporates the capacities of an efficient and pure trauma case study.

As a psychoanalyst and psychiatrist, he is distinguished for producing the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies – the world's first archive of testimonies of Holocaust survivors, witnesses, and bystanders recorded on video. He had accumulated over 12000 hours of interviews with the Holocaust survivors. It has become a genuinely controversial work; a psychologist has created this archive for his fellow Holocaust sufferers. He also developed an impeccable case study that touches on the issue of witnessing. Throughout this study, related to the Holocaust catastrophe, which could also be applied to other traumas, Dori Laub introduced three levels of witnessing: he explains them in his book *Testimony, Crises of Witnessing in Literature Psychoanalysis and History* (1992) “I recognize three separate, distinct levels of witnessing in relation to Holocaust experience: the level of being a witness to oneself with the experience; the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others; and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself” (75).

Dominick LaCapra is known as a historian for his immaculate role in trauma theory. Nonetheless, the keywords on trauma he set forth are unquestionably critical to the whole arena of trauma. In his book, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), he coins the steps towards salvation: "I would also distinguish in nonbinary terms between two additional interacting processes: acting out and working through, which are interrelated modes of responding to loss or historical trauma. As I have intimated, if the concepts of acting out and working through are applied to absence, it would

have to be in a special sense. I have argued elsewhere that mourning might be seen as a form of working through, and melancholia as a form of acting out" (65).

Theoretical Framework

The present study draws on trauma to focus on the stylistic aspects of its treatment in established and nonestablished poetry processes. The introduction to LaCapra's three primary forms of trauma maintains that via an etymological overview, structural trauma is a prerequisite to the other two types. It refers to philosophical concepts such as fundamental and abstract transformations in life; in that regard, 'absence,' another notion of LaCapra, considers an authentic lack that had never existed for the traumatized person. He states that "trauma" does not always occur due to losing something; sometimes, it is the "absence" of something that creates a lack in the psyche. Keeping in mind that there are no sources for treatment when humans are grieving for something they have never had, the unconscious mind relates it to a "loss," and the "trauma" treatment starts at that point. Hence, to have an authentic treatment of "trauma," a person or a psychiatrist must know whether it originally was a "loss" or an "absence." Another compelling notion that LaCapra has developed chiefly and not introduced is "historical trauma." This term was first announced by Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart in the 1980s. It should also be considered that although there are different views towards this theory, all of them concede that this historical trauma causes people of the next generation to be struck by more mental diseases than ordinary people. Considering warriors, terrorists, or soldiers who were firing guns or killing innocent people, LaCapra introduced the concept of perpetrator trauma, denoting that although they were not victims and what has happened to them has not been entirely unintentional, some traumatic emotions might occur, and this theorist is willing to scrutinize it. In this article, the mentioned key term has been elaborated by inspecting Bennett's experience as a bomb-throwing pilot during the Vietnam War.

The next concept is "witnessing," understanding Laub's ideology, there are "three levels of witnessing." By explaining the separate, distinct stages, this psychiatrist, being a witness of the Holocaust himself claims in "Truth and Testimony, The Process and the Struggle" (1991): "The level of being a witness to oneself within the experience, the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others, and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself" (75). It should also be stated that in this article, due to both poets' situations, only the first-level witness will be thoroughly comprehended since they had encountered trauma in the war first hand.

LaCapra also has two options for "trauma" treatment: he labels them as acting out and working through. It could be stated that the former notion is related to mourning, and the latter is the

healing process. He claims explicitly that these two steps are inseparable because the latter is the pursuance of the former "Trauma, Absence, Loss" (1999) "Acting-out and working-through are intimately linked but analytically distinguishable processes" (718).

The next step is to distinguish whether the process they are going through is acting out or working through; these are the terms that LaCapra discussed in his article, as mentioned above, to investigate the strong effect the event has on them. LaCapra remarks in his article that "in acting-out, the past is performatively regenerated or relived as if it were fully present rather than represented in memory and inscription, and it hauntingly returns as the repressed" (716). In other words, acting out could be taken as a period when the victim mourns his trauma, and if the person is successful, he could move to the next level that is working through, a situation where the traumatized person could overcome the devastations and return to his normal life.

Their poems will be scrutinized to detect the impact of trauma on their psyche and, consequently, to check whether poetry could positively affect them during the healing process. Generally, this article aims to detect the poets' psychological status and understand whether their purpose was closure or merely to illustrate the traumatic situation in which they had been trapped. An amalgamation of these concepts will be administered to the chosen poems desiring to achieve the trauma treatment goal.

Bob Holman : An Entrepreneur of Poetics

To talk about Bob Holman is to consider the vast array of his enterprises over the past four decades; being a poet and art activist are not adequate adjectives to fully illuminate his characteristics. As the founder of numerous poetry clubs, television series and documentaries, theatrical poetry, and Endangered Language Activism, not only has he been thoroughly occupied, but he has also introduced poetry to an abounding and distinguishable number of people from all around the globe.

Despite the variety of Holman's works, the researcher of this article has restricted the study to the two poetry towers composed in the event of the explosion of New York's Twin Towers in 2001. This needs to be considered thoroughly in terms of the poems' content and form. Produced for alleviation, Bob Holman divided the poems into two 110 lines, reminiscent of exploded towers. Therefore, their shapes were also observed. To consider these poems, their visual designs should first be acknowledged. The first similar element in both poems is the color: the original towers were gray, but the black used in these towers might represent the melancholy of their shattering. The poems were written in white to represent those who have lost their lives. The difference lies in the size of the words; in the first tower, composed by nonestablished poets, more lines are

large enough to catch the beholder's eye, and it primarily concerns 'words,' which are repeated and magnified several times. Conversely, the second *Tower of Words* concerns tangible memories and mundane life events; the lines are mainly small, with only a few oversized words depicting the trauma that happened to people. Comparing and contrasting them would give insight into the kind of contemplation in an established and a nonestablished poet's minds, how they manage their trauma through the poems, and the tentative result they would achieve.

At the beginning of the first poem, there is a brief explanation by Holman, who discussed the process of these poems' creation, mentioning that in the city, especially at the site of the catastrophe, people responded in verses, which could be seen in the window dust, burial grounds, and emails. On the biennial anniversary of the disaster, Holman created a website and asked everyone to participate and write lines reminiscing the situation. The significance of Holman's creative circles around him benefited from the synergy of traumatized people.

In *Tower One*, a variety of languages and types of writings can be inspected; "Wisewomansays: Como el fénix, alzemonos de entre las cenizas un pueblo unido" (4), which is translated as, 'Like the phoenix, let us rise from the ashes a united people.' This line and the few following that discuss the phoenix are indicators of the dead people and how it has made the survivors united with each other in the hope of gaining closure and justice. Nevertheless, they are among the few lines in this poem containing touches on literature; the rest concern the events of the day along with deeply personal emotions. Some of the lines to accentuate it are as follows: "Follow us as we run up the streets. / How fast can you run tough rubber boots?/ The fireman's feet blister/ Dogs listen, and breathing pain. / We have become the heat-slick melt of infrastructure" (26-30). With reference to emotions, it should be stated that from the lines, which are composed by a significant number of nonestablished poets, they are genuinely perplexed and incapable of overcoming their grief; in LaCapra's terminology, they are caught in the first stage of 'acting out' "Maybe if I fill up the hole in my stomach I can fill up the hole in the building/ and plug up the emptiness fill up the hole plug up my heart in my stomach/ the building fix and patch and fill in the emptiness fix the world my head/ my heart the building and stuff in and fill and patch my heart and fix the/ world and and and stuff and patch and fix and fill and fix" (60). The poem ends with no closure; it is only a stream of sorrow that lacks salvation. It feels incomplete and relieves the tensions of neither the authors nor the audience. Here are the ending lines "Tips my tongue that is loose with words that cannot stop" (110).

The second tower is composed of full awareness of the process, from witnessing the catastrophe to 'working through' the trauma. The PDF styles of the two towers are also noteworthy; all the lines of the first poem and the introduction, which cover about one-third of the page, are

enclosed within one page; as a result, the size of the words is minimal. In contrast, the second tower is designed academically, the word size is standard, and every line is written separately; therefore, it is expanded into two pages. Akin to the previous poem, it begins with Bob Holman's lines, yet in comparison to the first tower, and as a consequence of its concoction with other established poets, the last lines are more sophisticated and contain more literal contexts "In times of crisis, poets lose words. Find some: soul, soul I say, to name the smoke-beings like/constellations in the night sky of this city and cities to come. / Focus on the Muses, write while trembling, deliver eternity/ sky of this city and cities to come" (1-4).

It also contains political criticisms, such as 'Women in the Middle East, who knew nothing about it. They were washing clothes'(11). This could indicate how little it mattered to the people, specifically to the women responsible for the attack.

The first quarter of the poem includes descriptions, how it happened, and how it made the poets feel; therefore, a conscientious examination would illuminate a poet's perspective of the trauma. Compared to the previous poem, which mainly included visual and harsh explanations of the situation and their reactions, literature is the priority, and along with it appears the description of the trauma and the poets' emotions. As a result, the second tower is more delicate.

Two horizontal towers were born: those fleeing the fire and those coming close. help help helping out!

She cries her hair a morning ruin: see our burnt balconies of air.

We're breathing it in, all of it, all of them.

Ash-light this mask my eyes refuse to hide behind.

I look through a pupil of fire, an eyelid of ash

while running from a truth we cherish yet cannot abide.

into the residue of those screams and shouts unheard in the multilayered collapse revealed again and again via satellite, as above and below the creatures deny the supremacy of architecture,

a lock of flame-red hair or a spoke from her wheelchair,

but grief is my address. (21-30)

Although the literature is a priority, politics are more foregrounded in this poem. The lines resemble Amiri Baraka's criticisms of the attack; they blame everyone for not ignoring and discriminating against the Middle Easterners:

Unarmed Afghani women bare their faces to print's dead eyes in America.

In Bhopal they're still looking for Warren Anderson.

Guilty, guilty, you guilty, the whole damn country guilty of Middle East/non-white hostility

—i.e., “If anyone was ever right or wrong, this time they lost it.”

“But war it is and it is our destiny or so it seems,” sighs the old man on Flanders fields (53-55)

However, unlike the former poem, which was a monotonous and unchanging stream of the disaster’s explanations, the latter has a roadmap. It begins with some visual explanations of the explosion, continues by delving into the emotions of the traumatized, and ends with salvation. Therefore, midway, the traumatized is searching for a future light to overcome trauma: “You lifted me up and showed me all. Will my love survive your fall? Do shaking and silence yield to reason and reflection/to mirrors red, white, and blue?/ Let us not tremble. Let us not be quiet a quiet/A maze of graces?/ How great the art? We shall overcome?/ Wisdom and Dharma shall prevail” (66-70)! A few lines later, the poets instruct the words to find an answer to this trauma, ‘Words on page, mete out this woe; words on page undo sorrow’ (95). They believe that only the literature can overcome this sorrow.

And just thinking of literature, we have not learned to do without.

sour hearts blacken the new page, and rage is the only emotion swirling in the rubble.

26 letters is all we’ve got to make sense of the space between the canyons in our hearts.

Dante’s mythic animals, Chippewa, Sappho’s curse, and village-explainer American flags flags?

How about poetry’s long stride, Whitman: We need you to save the covenant, we cannot cover up.

the genitalia of old Roman copies in the Justice Department too late and soon. (100-104)

These lines could be highlighted as the paper’s manifest, claiming that poetry, whether written or read, would assist a traumatized person through his treatment. The poets claim that within trauma emerges rage, and the best path towards relief from the rage is through using the 26 letters of the alphabet and making sense of our feelings.

The other significant difference between the two towers is the use of figures of speech in the second tower; alliteration is an instance of the “Love in the time of globalized greed and Day-glo diarrhea of privatized prisons and public/poverty, of preordained propaganda and gentrified genocide, of homogenized hate and/ consumer circumcision, of paranoid patriotism and preemptive poverty, of/ prepackaged pollution and preempted poetry (106). With the repetition of the letter P, the poets attempt to emphasize the significance of poetry and claim that writing this poem is a way of indicating how vital poetry can be in trauma treatment. The poem truly ends in such a robust way that emphasizes and proves that poetry is the most significant path towards salvation; ‘We are on the verge of imagining something else, aren’t we? Can you feel

sentence forming? "Love should be put into action," screamed the dirty hermit of another poem' (110).

By comparing the two towers of words, it can be concluded that, in a way, Bob Holman wished to send this message to the world that if a person is educated in the field of literature, he is bestowed with a higher chance of surviving trauma. The poems declare that a poetic mind is able to manage his feelings and emotions more logically and withdraws a roadmap, depicting that the academic minds feel less rage towards other people for what has happened to them and are majorly searching for a resolution and not someone to blame.

Cynthia Anderson and Joanna Carman: nonestablished and nonactive

Two women have composed poems as first-level witnesses; both are nonestablished, and there is no accurate record of their birth and death dates. Furthermore, their similarities allowed the researcher to place them under a single subcategory for better comparison and results. Their prior similarity is their gender; being both women and mothers and sisters of soldiers who participated in Middle Eastern wars brought uncanny resemblances. The other affinity lies in the style of their poems; they both have composed narratorial poems discussing their men's adventures and emotions in the war.

Both poems are elegies regarding the Iraq-American war. Joanna Carman's "This Place Called War" (2004), short, one-page poetry, considers his brother's journey to fight the 'monsters'; this term is repeated in Cynthia Anderson's poem. At the beginning of the poem, her brother is brave, yet in the end, he loses his hopes and courage; he is afraid to leave and never come back: "Ed never cries. / Mom and I are crying for him/ His back/all packed, his day is here,/ But Ed looks really scared".

The second poem, "Twas the night before Baghdad," written by Cynthia Anderson, mother of a soldier, as she introduces herself, is longer and more critical of the government's decisions that led to the war. Its narration reflects the process through which the Iraq-American war occurred. Unlike the previous poem, which was composed of four uneven stanzas, this poem comprises sixteen quatrains, which could indicate her knowledge of poetry, yet her language is slang; she uses words such as 'cuz,' therefore her true purpose might have been to symbolize herself and her poem as an ordinary person in society. In her poetry, she reproaches President Bush by calling him 'our baby Bush,' she thoroughly blames him for the war by mentioning his purpose, which was solely to earn more money: "He lied to us all/ About terror and pain/ When all that he's after/ Is monetary gain."

Unlike the former poem's most specific emotion, which was sorrow and dread, this poem circles rage; it does not foreground her personal experience of losing her son to war. At the start of the poem, she uses brave words such as "The soldiers at attention/Fists raised in the air/Saddam is a monster!/ We must all go there!" Focusing on words like 'attention' and the two exclamation marks at the end of the last two lines illustrates courage and patriotism. Although it begins with positive energy, it ends in rage as a consequence of the president's egotistical plans of earning more power and money while killing innocent people and soldiers on the battlefield "With Christmas upon us/ He steps up his work/ Of campaigning again/ The self-serving jerk!"

Not being as sensational as the previous poem does not deprive him of being a traumatic poem. The impersonality of this poem could put it in the category of 'historical trauma.' In his *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), LaCapra defines the term as "historical trauma is related to particular events that do indeed involve losses, such as the Shoah or the dropping of the atom bomb on Japanese cities" (80). Similar to other traumas in this article, considering its wide range of involved people, this war can also be counted as a 'historical trauma.'

It could be stated that some traces of 'structural trauma' are depicted in Cynthia Anderson's poem; as discussed earlier, 'structural trauma' is a term coined by Dominick LaCapra, which refers to a type of devastation that the victim never had. This sort of lack refers to more philosophical issues; some examples from his book *Writing History Writing Trauma* (2001) are as follows: "separation from the (m)other, the passage from nature to culture, the eruption of the pre-oedipal or presymbolic in the symbolic, and so forth" (72). Therefore, 'structural trauma' is connected with 'absence' rather than 'loss.' In Anderson's tone, a sense of 'absence' is felt that cannot be filled with any resolution.

As a result, none of the poets will reach salvation from their poems because they are not seeking it. They have not passed the melancholia stage, which, according to LaCapra, is called 'acting out.' As its innovator defines it as a matter of "being haunted by revenants and reliving the past in its shattering intensity" (90). Henceforth, it seems preposterous for them to enter the second stage of 'working through' and attaining closure.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to identify traces of literature and poetry in the process of trauma treatment. In other words, the researcher aspired to justify the beneficial role of writing poems to resolve strains. To meet this ambition, the surveyor made an effort to discover and scrutinize a number of traumatized poets, each of which had a unique background. Half of them were nonestablished poets, and there is only one poem available to them; ergo, not much about their

lives before and following the poems can be understood. However, they were included in the article to contemplate their poetic writing, diction, and, most significantly, their approach to applying poetry to come to terms with their mental damage or, in the best-case scenario, cure it. It was found that, first, they stayed in the first level of treatment, 'acting out,' as probably unconsciously, they are pointing to themselves as the caring family of the soldiers and wishing to shed light on how they have become victims as well.

Second, they did not elaborate more on their artistic career, probably due to a lack of knowledge or interest; this is an issue that could be taken into consideration in order to rate the possibility of better results from poetry writing. In other words, in the three poems composed of nonpoets, no act of redemption is apprehensible as they both poured out their rage and sorrow, and they did not have enough space to come to terms with their trauma. It should also be acknowledged that the two women are not the only nonestablished poets in this article; Bob Holman's first tower is composed of nonestablished poets. It should be taken into account that, by reading their poems, no redemption could be detected as similar to the previous poets; for them, poetry was a tool to express their deepest emotions and they were successful in finding a cure for their trauma. By some means it could be explained that without the help of literary education 'inability for trauma' happens to the traumatized; a term coined by the Holocaust victim Laub, pertaining to the fact that although what happened was real, it took place outside the parameters of normal reality, such as causality, sequence, place, and time. He then demonstrates that as a result of that condition, the chance of treatment is null, for they must endure an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues in the present and is current in every respect.

In the genre of War Poetry, as the damage is significant and widespread until a person works through his trauma, his treatment is incomplete. However, many poets sufficed to pour out their sorrows in 'acting out' and have not taken a step forward; it could still be considered an acceptable approach, considering their deepest desires to share their melancholic emotions with the world, hoping to alleviate their pain and suffering to some extent.

To confidently determine whether a poet has been able to work through his trauma solely by analyzing his works and an abridged overview of his life, one is reminded of Freud's line that the language of poetry clearly shows the mental state of its composer. Therefore, through a thorough scrutiny of the poems, the influence of the bestowed poetry on them could be detected.

By inspecting the content of the paper, the researcher could claim that authenticity should be achieved not only by composing poems but also beyond that. For example, Bob Holman has been positively and dynamically operating in the field of literature, but as his vital concern is trauma,

he established organizations, reading and writing clubs, and they edited books in which they had gathered a significant number of other victim-poets to demonstrate the damages and various types of personal treatment of the matter.

The researcher concluded that poetry alone might not completely cure a traumatized patient, which is incompatible with the article's hypothesis at the beginning; notwithstanding, its immeasurable effects should not be disregarded. Therefore, it could be stated that while the act of creating lines is sublime, poetry sometimes guides people into social activities that not only allow composers to share their despair with others but also assist them in lending a hand to those in need and contributing to the world. Hence, the investigator uncovered that if a traumatized person, preferably a poet, due to their mindset resulting from the wisdom of literature, treats trauma accurately by following Laub's and LaCapra's approaches, they will be capable of rising beyond literature and applying their problem as a tool to heal other human beings.

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