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The Representation of Trauma in Literature: Jackie Kay's *The Lamplighter* and Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo*

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Trauma Studies: an introduction

The aim of this study is to demonstrate that literature can be a powerful means to represent trauma. This idea is supported by the analysis of two different literary works: Jackie Kay's *The Lamplighter* and Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo*. These works were not only written in different times, but they also deal with different historical events and they also belong to different genres: Kay's play or dramatised poem was first broadcast on BBC radio in 2007 as part of the commemoration of the bicentenary of the abolition of the African slave trade in Britain and it tells the stories of four African women ensalved in the 18th century; Levi's fragmented testimony was first published in 1947 and it deals with the dramatic life conditions in the death camp of Auschwitz between 1943 and 1945. At first sight, it may seem that they do not share any elements in common, but in fact it is important to underline that the primary purpose of both authors is basically the same: representing trauma through literature. Therefore, trauma, memory and the way in which literature can be used as a means to convey brutal discrimination, captivity and oppression related to traumatic experiences is at the basis of this comparative analysis. Since the releationship between trauma, memory and literature lies at the core of the branch of literary criticism called Trauma Studies, a general overview of this field could be useful to identify the common ground on which the comparison between *The Lamplighter* and *Se questo è un uomo* will develop.

The word "trauma" in its original Greek meaning only refers to injuries of the body; however, it is now associated both to physical and psychological painful experiences. This connection between traumas of the body and the mind was first explored in the context of psychiatry by Jean-Martin Charcot, the head of the psychiatric hospital "La Salpêtrière" in Paris, and his pupil Pierre Janet. At the end of the 19th century they started to include the notion of trauma in their studies on hysteria. In particular, Janet claims that one of the causes of dissociative psychopathology can be found in traumatic experiences: according to him, the identity of traumatised people is inevitably affected by the traumatic event and, for this reason, it is not able to normally develop.[1] Traumatised people are not able to accept the past and the memory of it, they thus need

1 R. Branchini (2013), "Trauma Studies: prospettive e problemi", *LEA - Lingue e letterature d'Oriente e d'Occidente*, pp. 391-392.

to dissociate the memory of the trauma from their ordinary life; as a consequence, they are likely to suffer from multiple personality disorder, which causes them to develop entirely separate identities.[2] These notions are at the basis of Sigmund Freud's first works: for instance, in *Jesenseits des Lustprinzips* (1920), written during the events surrounding World War I and World War II, he underlines the unpredictability of trauma and its constant return in the traumatised mind.[3] Therefore, the definition of trauma by Freud seems to refer to "the successive movement from an event to its repression to its return"[4]. The victim of trauma re-experiences the traumatic event several times because he/she is not able to fully assimilate it while it is happening; for this reason, the concept of trauma is not exclusively related to the single, violent and original event, it is rather the fact of surviving it which represents the main feature of trauma. It is thus possible to describe the experience of trauma as the paradoxical relationship between unexpected violence and survival.[5]

Freud was the first to link the above considerations on the private and psychological sphere of trauma to political and collective traumatic events. For example, the new emergent industrial society of the 19th century was characterised by the acceptance of trauma in every-day life; however, it is World War I that represents the very first traumatic experience involving both the personal and the collective features of trauma. In the above-mentioned work *Jesenseits des Lustprinzips*, Freud indeed explores the effects of traumatic historical events on the psyche, in particular the so called war neuroses caused by the experience of World War I. Most of the soldiers who survived World War I were indeed haunted by nightmares and relivings of battlefield events: the survivors were never fully able to grasp the meaning of those traumatic events, so they were foced to face them over and over again in their dreams.[6] This intuition was later developed in the context of psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and neurobiology and it led to the study of post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, which can be described as

2 B.A. Van der Kolk & O. Van der Hart (1991), "The Intrusive Past: the Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma", *The American Imago; a Psychoanalytic Journal for the Arts and Sciences*, pp. 431-449.
3 Branchini, p. 393.
4 C. Caruth (1995), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 7.
5 Caruth (1995), p. 9.
6 C. Caruth (1996), *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 59-62.

> an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.[7]

This type of mental disorder was included in the 1980 edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* by the *American Psychiatric Association* and, in this way, the concept of trauma finally acquired scientific dignity.[8] Before this official acknowledgment, PTSD had been described as shell shock, combat stress, delayed stress syndrome and traumatic neurosis, but nowadays it appears to represent the major example of the link between the individual psyche and external violent events experienced by a multitude of people. This interpretation shows how collective trauma, or simply the memory of it, can influence the development of the self. This idea can be related to the concept of collective memory, that is

> a net of language, a meta narrative, which a community shares and within which individual biographies are oriented.[9]

Therefore, historical trauma appears to be central in the dialogic process defining collective memory, which is constantly negotiating between individual experiences and collective events. In order to better understand how individual subjects react to collective trauma from a psychological point of view, it is possible to take into account the distinction between "habit" or "implicit" memory and "ordinary" or "narrative" memory made by Janet. "Implicit" memory automatically stores ordinary life experiences; instead, "narrative" memory is uniquely used by human beings to make sense out of experience. According to Janet, a collective trauma cannot be easily integrated in these cognitive schemes because traumatic memory is dissociated from conscious awareness and voluntary control.[10]

The definition by Janet of a kind of "traumatic" memory separated from "ordinary" memory and Freud's studies on trauma, which underline its unpredictable, unassimilated, belated and repetitive nature and its relation to collective events, represent the fundamental references of Trauma Studies. This field of literary criticism is mainly based on Paul De Man and Jacques Derrida's post-structuralist theories and it

7 Caruth (1996), pp. 57-58.
8 Branchini, p. 389.
9 R. Eyerman (2001), *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 7.
10 Van der Kolk & Van der Hart, p. 427.

aims at analysing the impact of trauma, as defined by psychoanalysis and neuroscience, on culture and literature.[11] Trauma Studies indeed investigate the possibility of representing a traumatic event through literature. This theme is very controversial because, due to its apparently impossible rational accessibility, trauma seems to be an experience which cannot be conveyed by literature, and art in general. The direct victims of trauma could decide to write testimonies, providing an apparently objective representation of the event; however, could the traumatised mind really remember the traumatic event in full awareness? This last question is strictly related to the ambiguous relatioship between literature and trauma and to the risk of inauthenticity.

These topics will be further explored in the following chapters, but they can be useful to introduce two other relevant concepts in the context of Trauma Studies: "prosthetic memory" and "postmemory". If testimonies after trauma could be unreliable, would a literary work written by an author who did not experience directly the event be acceptable? Or more in general, can fiction be considered as a suitable means to represent trauma? Alison Landsberg has tried to answer these questions through the notion of "prosthetic memory", that is the memory resulting from a transferential process, through which the traumatic past is internalised by a person who did not live through the event. Landsberg claims that this person does not simply learn a historical fact, but he/she is able to build a strong personal link between his/her subjectivity and the traumatic memory.[12] The same topic is explored by Marianne Hirsch, who questions herself about the possibility for the children of survivors of a collective trauma, such as the Holocaust, to fully understand their parents' suffering. She states that, although these children cannot totally make sense out of a traumatic experience they did not live through, it is still possible to identify cognitive and affective "acts of transfert" which enable the sharing of memories across generations.[13] These "post-generations" are involved in a constant struggle between the necessity and the impossibility of reliving their parents' painful experience; however, both Landsberg and Hirsch underline how this "second-generation" memory can be perceived as a conscious form of

11 Branchini, pp. 389-390.

12 A. Landsberg (2004), *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 2.

13 M. Hirsch (2012), *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*, New-York: Columbia University Press, p. 31.

identification. Hirsh defines this type of memory as "postmemory" and describes its aesthetic strategies as an "attempted, and always postponed, repositioning and reintegration"[14] of a traumatic past in new contexts. Similarly, Geoffrey Hartman, in his work *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust*, refers to "second generations" as expressing the trauma of memory, in opposition to the eyewitness generation expressing "a return of memory despite trauma". According to him, "second generations" feel responsible for filling the gap left by trauma.[15]

Taking into consideration once again the notion of "prosthetic memory", it is important to underline that one of the reasons for the formation of this kind of indirect memory is represented by a major consequence of historical trauma, that is diaspora. In her work *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, Landsberg indeed claims that

> The links between parents and children, between individual persons and community – Kinship ties – were broken and alternative methods for the transmission and dissemination of memories were required.[16]

The author here shows how collective trauma is likely to cause great ruptures in the social fabric of a community and one possibility to heal them is represented by "prosthetic memory". Landsberg focuses in particular on the social and cultural ruptures caused by diaspora. She highlights the impossibility of a straightforward and direct transmission of memory in a diasporic context: in a diaspora traumatic memories, identities and cultural practices cannot be easily inherited from one generation to the next or transmitted from the homeland to diasporic people. For instance, certain memories, traditions and rituals which are important in the homeland do not have the same strong impact on diasporic people. In this case, Landsberg's reasoning can be compared to the notion of diaspora provided by one of the most important contemporary theorist of the field, Rubin Cohen, who defines this phenomenon as a "dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically, to two or more foreign regions"[17]. The choice of the adverb "traumatically" seems to underline the direct relationship between diaspora and trauma. Although the phenomenon of diaspora is a consequence of a traumatic

14 Hirsch, p. 122.
15 G. Hartman (2002), *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust*, NewYork: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 52.
16 Landsberg, p. 2.
17 R. Cohen (2008), *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, London: Routledge, p.17.

event which causes rupture and dispersal, Cohen also describes diaspora as an opportunity to form strong ethnic groups and co-ethnic groups in different countries of settlement characterised by a collective consciousness based on the transmission of a common history and a common cultural and religious heritage.

This interpretation of the notion of diaspora appears to confirm Landsberg's and Hirsch's idea about the possibility to forge a collective memory despite the ruptures caused by trauma. Landsberg indeed states that the concept of "prosthetic memory" leads to a blurred distinction between individual and collective memory. An example of the formation of a historical collective memory is represented by the association between blackness and slavery: African American identity is indeed characterised by the memory and the representation of slavery. This specific collective memory has resisted diaspora and it can also be considered as a clear example of "prosthetic memory": even coloured people in the United States, and in other parts of the world, who did not live through the traumatic experiences of the slave trade, the African diaspora and slavery, feel connected to this historical memory. This is possible thanks to a collective identity aiming at reinterpreting and accepting the past. Therefore, the direct experience of a traumatic event does not seem to be essential for the creation of collective memory; on the contrary, later generations, who did not experience the event but still identify themselves through it, are likely to give a new meaning to trauma in response to their present needs.[18] As a result, "second generations" have the possibility to reintegrate the traumatic past in the present in order to heal the wounds caused by trauma. Cultural trauma could actually be resolved by the articulation of collective memory and collective identity. However, Landsberg goes beyond Eyerman's concept of collective memory related to a particular ethnic group: she believes that the memories forged as a reaction to collective trauma do not belong exclusively to a specific social and cultural group. In this sense, the notion of collective memory is enlarged to the point that the traumatic events of the Holocaust and the slave trade can be conceived as part of a single memory which is not solely related to Jewish or African American history, but rather to world history.[19] The comprehensive interpretation of these historical traumas will be further developed, but it is important in this context because it exemplifes how

18 Eyerman, pp. 17-18.
19 Landsberg, p. 2.

collective memory does not erase cultural differences, but it can create the conditions for connection and understanding between different peoples.

Landsberg and Hirsch's theories can be supported by another important literary theorist, Geoffrey Hartman, who relates the uncertainty and the struggle of modernity to the burden of past cataclysmic events. He also claims that traumatic memory can be consciously, or even unconscously, transmitted through generations.[20] Referring to the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, Hartman underlines that they seek a strong identification with the traumatic past because their moral and psychological burden seems to be not so different from that of their parents and grandparents. In addition, as it is possible to notice in the following passage, Hartman considers memory as a powerful means to confront the dramatic implications of trauma:

> Memory, and especially the memory that goes into storytelling, is not simply an afterbirth of experience, a secondary formation: it enables experiencing, it allows what we call the real to enter consciousness and word-presentation, to be something more than trauma followed by a hygienic, and ultimately illusory, mental erasure.[21]

The reference to storytelling is relevant in the context of this study because one of the main purposes of literature is exactly telling stories and, although traumatic memory seems impossible to tell, here Hartman apparently suggests that storytelling, and possibly literature, can be interpreted as a tool to avoid “mental erasure”. Similarly, one of the most appreciated, and at the same time criticised, theorist of Trauma Studies, Cathy Caruth, sees the language of literature as a possible way to shape our understanding of trauma. She insists on Freud's example of Torquato Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered* (1581): Tancred's repeated killing of his beloved Clorinda is interpreted by Freud as a clear representation of the repetition and the reliving of a traumatic event in the traumatised mind. Caruth uses this example in order to demonstrate that literature is able to articulate and represent trauma and she explains this concept by claiming that

> If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experiences, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing.[22]

The special role in the representation of trauma given by Caruth to literature is arguable, but her work is still relevant because it describes trauma as both demand for and refusal

20 G. Hartman(2004), *Scars of the Spirit: The Struggle against Inauthenticity*, New-York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 3.
21 Hartman (2002), pp. 158-159.
22 Caruth (1996), pp. 2-3.

of storytelling. This tension between silenced memory and the necessity of telling traumatic experiences, between remembering and forgetting, is at the basis of the difficult relation between literature and trauma. Therfore, if literature has always been the "place" where human contradictions are explored, it can also be the "place" where unbearable and unexplainable events can be put into words.

All the considerations made in the present introduction on the basis of Trauma Studies represent the general theoretical approach upon which the comparative analysis of Jackie Kay's *The Lamplighter* and Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* will develop. In the following paragraphs, the main themes of this analysis and their relation to the previous statements will be explained more in detail.

In the first chapter, the historical contexts of the slave trade and the Holocaust is first briefly explored, and then the possible connections between these collective traumas are analysed with particular reference to the concepts of "cross-traumatic affiliation" and "multidirectional memory", which are related to the above-mentioned notion of collective memory. This parallel interpretation is not intended to hide the obvious differences characterising these two dramatic events, it rather aims at highlighting the traumatic history in which the works at the centre of this study are set and at reinforcing a possible ethical and unifying understanding of these meaningful traumas.

In the second chapter, some general information about the authors and their works are provided; however, the main focus of the chapter is the interiorization of trauma through shared memory and storytelling on the part of the works' protagonists. This topic will lead to the controversial relationship between memory, testimony, history, literature and trauma, which, as already noted, is central in the context of Trauma Studies.

In line with Freud's definition of trauma in relation to survival, Caruth identifies at the core of traumatic stories a "double telling", which she describes as

> […] the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival.[23]

This "double telling", conveyed by Kay and Levi through the ambivalent necessity of remembering and forgetting, will be the starting point of the third chapter. In this section, the process of dehumanization characterising both traumatic experiences of the

23 Caruth (1996), p.7.

slave trade and the Holocaust will be explored in contrast with the attempts to maintain human dignity. The characters of both works, although constantly oppressed and humiliated, try to resist dehumanization through their cultural heritage and memory. As a result, even if surviving trauma seems to represent one important aspect of trauma itself, in these works both individual and collective memory can be seen as an act of survival. Furthermore, this interpretation of memory appears to confirm Landsberg, Hirsch and Hartman's idea about the possibility for direct and indirect memory to be a weapon against the terrible consequences of trauma.

The main topic of the fourth chapter is “split personality”, what Pierre Janet considers as one of the major effects of traumatic experiences. The protagonist of Kay's dramatised poem, Aniwaa, suffers from “split personality” and is unable to reconcile with her past: she tries to erase the memory of her dramatic past by splitting her identity into two entities related to different times, before and after slavery. Levi, being a victim of the Holocaust, is unable to accept his past and decides not to tell some painful events concerning his detention in the death camp of Auschwitz, probably because his traumatised mind is unable to fully assimilate them. Moreover, he struggles his whole life to bridge the gap between his profession as a chemist, his moral responsibility as witness and survivor and his role as a writer. This dissociation of the self, mainly resulting from the process of dehumanization, can be partly solved by the sharing of memories and storytelling, expressed in Levi's frequent choice of the pronoun “we” to represent the plurality of victims and in Kay's chorus of four slave women telling each other their traumatic story.

Chapter 5 focuses on the ambiguous relationship between victims and perpetrators. In both works, there is not always a clear-cut distinction between victims and perpetrators: the memory of the traumatic event is sometimes so distorted, that victims feel responsible for the atrocities they witnessed; some victims even decide to help perpetrators in order to survive in extreme conditions; the readers themselves are directly involved in the narration of trauma and they appear to become the perpetrators' “accomplices”. In this regard, it could be useful to analyse these last notions taking into account Irene Visser's definition of narrativization of trauma: she indeed describes the integration of the traumatic memory as including the “entanglement of complicity,

agency and guilt".[24]

As already noted at the beginning of the present introduction, *The Lamplighter* and *Se questo è un uomo* belong to different literary genres; for this reason, in the final chapter, some poems by Levi will be used as a tool to further explore the main thematic areas which *The Lamplighter* and *Se questo è un uomo* have in common. Certain poems included in the collection *Ad ora incerta* may enable to dwell once again on the subjects of dehumanization and memory. In particular, in some poems dreams are interpreted as the site of the returning traumatic experience and this is actually one of the features of trauma identified by Caruth, reviewing Freud's *Jesenseits des Lustprinzips*:

> The return of the traumatic experience in the dream is not the signal of the direct experience but, rather, of the attempt to overcome the fact that it was not direct, to attempt to master what was never fully grasped in the first place.[25]

In conclusion, this last quotation underlines once again the theoretical basis of this study: it indeed uses and extends the concepts at the basis of Trauma Studies in order to analyse in parallel the literary strategies and the main topics exploited by Kay and Levi in the attempt to represent two extremely dramatic historical traumas.

24 S. Andermahr (2016), *Decolonizing Trauma Studies: Trauma and Postcolonialism*, Basel: MDPI, p. 16.
25 Caruth (1996), p. 62.

Cross-traumatic affiliation

1.1 The historical context of the slave trade

The history of the African slave trade is extremely complex and, while confronting it, it is inevitable to look for the possible reasons for the death of so many African people, whose exploitation was functional to the economic progress of Europe and the American colonies. It is important to stress that Africans played a relevant role in "the history of early modernity, the industrialization of Europe, and the plantation economy in the Americas". For this reason, the slave trade can be considered as the major link between Africa, world economy and global history.[26] In order to conceive the history of the slave trade in relation to world history, it is necessary to turn to "transatlantic perspectives", which are in contrast with nationalist historiography. "Transatlantic perspectives" indeed challenge the traditional notions of state, class, race, ethnicity, culture and identity; in this way, it seems possible to put black slavery at the core of a single historical narrative concerning three continents: Africa, Europe and the Americas.[27]

Before turning to the possible reasons at the basis of the Atlantic slave trade, the definition of slavery should be made clear. Paul E. Lovejoy describes the institution of slavery as follows:

> Slavery is understood to mean the status of an individual who was considered to be property, that is someone who could be bought and sold as a person and therefore had a monetary value that was clearly established in local custom and law and was distinct from other forms of servile relationships and methods of exploitation.[28]

The crucial term in this definition appears to be "property" because slaves were not considered as human beings, they were rather treated as any other object which could be traded. In addition, the status of slavery was inherited; therefore, the offspring of slaves would automatically become slaves, and they could hope for freedom only in the case of emancipation or flight.

This brief description underlines the main dehumanising features of slavery and makes

26 T. Falola (2013), *The African Diaspora: Slavery, Modernity and Globalization*, Rochester: University of Rochester Press, pp. 4-5.
27 O. Akinwumi & T. Falola (2010), *Archaelogy of Atlantic Africa and The African Diaspora*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 3.
28 S. M. Shanguhyia & T. Falola (2018), *The Palgrave Handbook of African Colonial and Postcolonial History*, New-York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 104.

much more difficult the investigation of the reasons at the basis of this traumatic event, which seems to be by definition inexplicable. However, a possible starting point could be identified in the origins of anti-black prejudices. Many historians have shown that certain common stereotypes have been related to the condition of inferiority characterising slavery since ancient times. For instance, most of the time slaves were foreigners because of the common misconceptions in relation to xenophobia. Therefore, anti-black racism, long before the 18th-century invention of "race", did not represent the only justification for the enslavement of supposedly inferior people: in the Greco-Roman era, for example, some nonblack ethnic groups were indeed subject to discrimination, oppression and social exclusion. Nevertheless, in both the ancient and medieval past, slaves were associated to otherness: they were considered as inherently different not only because of differences concerning the country of origin, but also ugliness and dark skin. Furthermore, the unreasonable nature of this prejudice is revealed by the fact that slaves were identified as ugly and black, regardless of their actual physical appearances.[29] Peculiar physical features can be used as markers to justify the classification of a group of people under the label of "natural slaves": dark skin, curly black hair, broad lips and noses are distinctive and highly visible features, which made the enslavement of African blacks much easier.[30]

Though further research is needed, it seems possible to trace the origins of black slavery in the period that started with the Islamic attacks against the Byzantine Empire in the 7th and 8th centuries and ended with the era of the crusades. At the beginning of the Islamic expansion, many Byzantine Christians, but also Muslims, were indeed enslaved and later a great number of Caucasian slaves were brought to Egypt and the Middle East. For this reason, Christian Europeans began to associate those regions with their Muslim enemies, who were seen as dangerous and barbaric people. This association could be interpreted as one of the very first examples of racial stereotypes.[31]

As previously noted, the expansion of Islam in various parts of North, East and West Africa during the holy wars caused the increase of war captives turned into slaves, and

29 D.B. Davis (2006), *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*, New-York: Oxford University Press, p. 50.
30 Davis, p. 53.
31 Davis, pp. 60-63.

the slave trade deriving from it took part in a larger trade network between sub-Saharan Africa, the Mediterranean and Arab worlds. This trade network preceding the Atlantic slave trade is called trans-Saharan trade and included three main routes: through the Saharan Desert and Egypt; across the Red Sea; through north-western Africa. This trade did not only involve slaves, but also raw materials such as salt, copper, silk, gold and ivory.[32] As a result, it is important to notice that Africans were enslaved and sold long before the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade ruled by European states: the overland routes of the trans-Saharan trade had indeed provided African slaves to the Arab slave markets of North Africa for centuries.[33]

Although in antiquity, and then in Medieval and Renaissance Europe, the extremely negative symbolism of the colour black was one of the causes of the classification of African people as "natural slaves", it was only with the beginning of the slave trade that black slavery became a crucial point of the European economic system.

African slaves indeed represented a valuable source of free labour to exploit in the plantations of the American colonies, where the new luxuries consumed by Western societies, such as sugar, tobacco and coffee, were produced. Before deciding to transport slaves from Africa to the New World, European settlers had tried to enslave Native Americans; however, Amerindians, as opposed to African blacks, proved not to be suitable plantation workers. In addition, because of their little capacity for resisting imported diseases, the mortality of Amerindians was extremely high after the European settlement in the New World. As a consequence, Indian slaves were slowly replaced by African blacks and this replacement was particularly supported by two strong defenders of Indian rights, Licenciado Zuazo and Bartolomé de Las Casas. In 1516, completely ignoring African rights, they suggested to increase the number of African slaves imported in the American colonies in order to spare more Indian lives. This fight against the cruel treatment of Amerindians led to Spain's New Laws of 1542, according to which Native Americans were allowed to own property and Spanish settlers were forbidden to exploit them in mines.[34] Therefore, the importation of African slaves in the

32 Akinwumi & Falola, p. 128.
33 J. Walvin (2013), *Crossings: Africa, the Americas and the Atlantic Slave Trade*, London: Reaktion Books, p. 29.
34 Davis, p. 97-98.

New World increased in that period.

However, the African slave trade did not begin at that time: in 1445 the Portuguese arrived on Arguin Island, off the African coast of Mauritania, and built their first African trading post. Later they set up other posts on the Atlantic coast of Africa and near the major rivers, such as the Senegal and the Gambia. Coastal kings and the ones who ruled the territories including the main rivers were annually paid by the Portuguese, who were thus allowed to trade gold, ivory, leather, spices and slaves in those regions.[35] These first Portuguese settlements were supported by the Roman Catholic Church: a papal bill of 1442 states that Portugal owned a monopoly on any discoveries in Africa. Moreover, Portuguese expansion was economically supported by great Genoese financiers, who after the fall of Constantinople were looking for new trading networks in the Atlantic islands.[36] Therefore, the earliest Atlantic slave trade was almost entirely controlled by the Portuguese and involved the transportation of Africans from one African coastal region to another, to the Portuguese islands in the Atlantic and to Europe. However, after the European settlement of the Americas, the Portuguese and the Spanish decided to ship African slaves to the American colonies in order to satisfy the demand for labour in the plantations. The first Africans to cross the Atlantic were indeed slaves or servants to Portuguese and Spanish settlers and did not sail from Africa but from Spain. Nevertheless, by the end of the 17th century, Portugal and Spain lost their monopoly on the slave trade because the Dutch, the British and the French established their colonies in the Americas.[37]

In the mid- and late 17th century, Britain was the greatest commercial and imperial power of Europe and, after the formation of the Royal African Company in 1672, the British became the main European presence on the African slave coast. At that time, London played a major role in the African trade, but during the 18th century Bristol and Liverpool's commercial activities involving black slaves intensified rapidly and far exceeded London's trade.[38] After 1780 Liverpool was considered as the slaving capital of England and the largest slave port in the Atlantic world, surpassing Bristol.[39]

35 Akinwumi & Falola, p. 131.
36 Walvin, pp. 21-22.
37 Walvin, pp. 58-59.
38 Walvin, pp. 77-79.
39 W. E. Kowaleski (2006), *The British Slave Trade and Public Memory*, New-York: Columbia

The first Africans shipped to North America left from these British ports and were employed in the tobacco plantations of the Chesapeake Bay, in Virginia and Maryland. That changed after 1730, when most African slaves were sent to South Carolina in order to work for the developping coastal rice industry. However, it should be noticed that the total number of African arrivals in North American colonies is extremely lower than the number of Africans imported in the other colonies of the New World.[40] There were indeed some differences in the role of slavery in the economic and social context of Northern, Southern, Brazilian and West Indian colonies. First of all, it is important to underline that the British founders of North American colonies, apart from South Carolina, had no intention to create slave societies: this is why it is possible to argue that before the 1600s African slavery had not been at the core of the social and economic life of Northern colonies. However, when the British acquired New York, which at the time was called New Amsterdam and had been under Dutch dominion, about 20 percent of the population consisted of black slaves. This shift was related to different connected events: during Holland's war for independence from Spain, several slaves were captured on Spanish and Portuguese ships, allowing Holland to temporarily rule the Atlantic slave trade and control some slave-trading centres on the West African coast. Secondly, the American historian David Brion Davis defines Northern colonies as "societies with slaves", in opposition to Southern, West Indian and Brazilian "slave societies": he points out that the main difference was represented by the lack of staple crops for export (for instance sugar, tobacco and rice) in North American colonies, whose economy was thus not completely based on slavery. On the contrary, the economy of Southern colonies entirely depended on slave labour and the exportation of products deriving from the plantations.[41] Thirdly, it is possible to identify another difference between the regions of the New World colonised by European settlers and it refers to the number of slave uprisings: on the one hand, there were no meaningful revolts in North America from 1831 to 1865; on the other hand, slave rebellions were quite common in Southern colonies, Brazil and the West Indies.[42]

University Press, p. 31.
40 Walvin, p. 130.
41 Davis, pp. 126-128.
42 Davis, p. 207.

As Frederick Douglass, a former slave and one of the most important writers in the context of slave narratives, stressed, slave revolts were almost always suicidal.[43] This is probably the main reason why there is not a great number of rebellions in the history of black slavery. However, there can be different kinds of slave revolts which may include both violent individual initiatives and massive conflicts. Resistance to slavery started in African villages, where some communities tried to fight slave traders using different strategies: barricaded villages, preparing canoes to escape, sending away children and women to safe places and hiding in the bush. If all these precautions did not work, slaves would try to escape during the marches to the African coast, where they were kept in dungeons and barracoons before being shipped to the Atlantic.[44] Resistance continued during the terrible travels to the Americas in the shape of shipboard mutinies: revolts on slave ships were rarely successful because even when Africans were able to overwhelm a crew, it was still almost impossible to sail the ship to safety without the help of experienced sailors.[45] Another form of resistance is represented by the so-called "maroon" settlements composed of African runaways, who lived in free communities hidden away in isolated and inaccessible hills and forests. "Maroon" societies were widespread in the Americas, but in particular in eastern and western Jamaica, Suriname and French Guyana. Other examples of "maroon" communities constantly fighting against oppression were situated in Canada and in Sierra Leone.[46]

There are also some examples of massive slave conspiracies and revolts, in which some slaves took the risk of being executed in order to strike for freedom. The earlier revolts took place in 1712 in New York City and later in 1739 in South Carolina. The most relevant rebellions of the 19th century are Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), a large rebellion in British Barbados (1816), South Carolina's Denmark Vesey conspiracy (1822), Demerara's revolt (1823), the so-called "Baptist War" in Jamaica (1831) and, in the same year, Nat Turner's uprising.[47] The rebellion at the beginning of this list and that at the end can be considered as the most known and significant ones and may require further discussion. The Haitian Revolution took place in the French Caribbean colony of

43 Davis, p. 206.
44 Walvin, pp. 104-105.
45 Walvin, p. 120.
46 Akinwumi & Falola, pp. 334-336.
47 Davis, p. 209.

Saint Domingue, where in 1804 the insurgent slaves and free people of colour finally defeated the British, Spanish and French armies and declared independence. Haiti is considered as the first self-proclaimed black state in the Americas and it was based on a Constitution inspired by the French Constitutions of 1791.[48] This document was extremely revolutionary because it included a ban on slavery and racial discrimination, the possibility of asylum for the victims of slavery and colonial genocide and the principle of non-interference towards neighbouring states.[49] Nat Turner's uprising broke out in Virginia, precisely in Southampton County, and it led to the murder of whites in several farmhouses of the region. Turner, the leader of the revolt, was initially able to escape the local militia, which captured all the rebels. Since Turner could read and write and many whites were convinced that he and his allies had been influenced by some antislavery pamphlets, the major consequence of this revolt was the decision taken by some Southern States to pass laws forbidding slave literacy.[50]

The history of the abolition of the slave trade is characterised by a key paradox: when the profits deriving from the slave trade were higher than ever, the major slaving nation, the British, suddenly realised that slavery was an unethical institution and not only began the process of abolition in British colonies, but also tried to prevent the other slaving nations from shipping black slaves. A possible explanation for this sudden change, however, does not relate to ethical reasons. It rather refers to British diverted commercial interests: because of the development of new British industries, Britain engaged in preventing the other colonial powers from profiting from the slave trade.[51] However, in this historical narration, Africans appear to be passive victims: they do not seem the protagonists of their liberation from slavery. This interpretation is at the centre of a passage by the cultural theorist and political activist Stuart Hall, quoted in Kowaleski's *The British Slave Trade and Public Memory*:

> Abolition has written out the agency of blacks. It's as if abolition were really a gift by liberal and reforming whites to the enslaved peoples and not one in which slaves themeselves played an active part.[52]

48 L.R. Gordon (2006), *A Companion to African-American Studies*, Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, p. 361.
49 Gordon, p. 370.
50 Davis, pp. 208-209.
51 Walvin, p. 169.
52 Kowaleski, p. 135.

The various forms of resistance that have been analysed in the previous paragraphs can easily deny the supposed passivity of African slaves in the fight for freedom.

The first steps towards the abolition of slavery were taken in 1787, when the *Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade* was formed in Britain. One year later, another society called *Société des Amis des Noirs* was created in France, and it paved the way for the outlawing of slavery in all French colonies in 1794; nevertheless, in 1802 Napoleon re-established slavery and the slave trade. In 1796 William Wilberforce's bill for abolishing the slave trade did not pass in Britain's House of Commons. However, almost twenty years after the formation of the *Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, Britain and the United States decided to outlaw the slave trade in 1808. The slave trade did not stop at that time and millions of Africans continued to be shipped to the Americas after 1808. In 1833 the *American Anti-Slavery Society* was founded and about eight hundred thousand slaves were emancipated in the British colonies: Britain paid twenty million pounds sterling to the slaves' owners or their creditors for the emancipation of the slaves; on the contrary, the newly freed slaves did not receive any compensation. However, colonial slavery partially ended only in August 1834, when an interim period of "Apprenticeship" was created. Therefore, the slaves were not completely freed until 1838; paradoxically, in the same period Britain put pressure on France, Spain and Portugal to end their own slave trades. Slavery was finally abolished in French and Danish colonies in 1848 as a consequence of wide-spread uprisings in Europe.[53] For Brazil, Cuba and Spain the process of abolition and emancipation was longer: after nearly twenty years of illegal importation, Brazil finally stopped African slave imports in 1850 and only in 1888 slaves were emancipated; Cuba put an end to the importation of African slaves after the Cuban War for independence started in 1868; in 1870 Spain passed a gradual emancipation act and in 1886 slavery was abolished in all Spanish colonies. In the history of the United States, abolition has always been associated with the figure of Abraham Lincoln: in 1863 he signed the Emancipation Proclamation and, after his assassination in 1865, Andrew Johnson became president and ratified the 13th Amendment, permanently abolishing slavery.[54]

It is important to underline that emancipation did not actually mean freedom for African

53 Davis, pp. 232-234.
54 Davis, p. 325.

slaves: for instance, in the mid-1860s about two hundred thousand Africans were freed from the slave ships and later became peasants or indentured workers in Sierra Leone, the Caribbean, Brazil and Cuban plantations, but were often unpaid; furthermore, some of them were able to go back to Africa, but were captured again and imprisoned once more on a slave ship.[55] Therefore, slavery continued to exist after emancipation and this is also true for some regions of Africa: although European slaving nations had abolished the slave trade, their demand for African products was higher and higher and this led to an extensive use of slave labour in many parts of Africa, where slavery survived until the 1930s.[56] This represents another great paradox in the history of the African slave trade and it can be related to another relevant aspect, that is the absurd relationship between the abolition of slavery and the colonisation of Africa. By the end of the 19th century, Africa had indeed been colonised by a few European nations: in this way, continental Africans lost their freedom once again and were deprived of full citizenship. Almost at the same time, diasporic African slaves were emancipated, but still fought discrimination and demanded citizenship in their nations.[57] Finally, it could be said that emancipation did not always improve the life conditions of former slaves both in Africa and in the diaspora and the consequences of centuries of slavery are still visible today.

1.2 A brief history of the Holocaust

The Holocaust is undoubtedly one of the most traumatic historical events of the 20th century: it was a terrible mass murder which completely destroyed an entire generation in the name of an insane ideology. Its strong impact on history can be well explained by the words of Rita Steinhardt Botwinick:

> Great historical events are generally subject to divergent points of view. Issues are rarely clear-cut; differences of interpretation are expounded, defended, and attacked. But the Holocaust does not lend itself to a debate on pros and cons. There is no justification, no defense, no rejoinder, there is only sorrow and guilt.[58]

Despite the horror of this dramatic event, it is important to remember that this mass murder had been planned and organised by a legal political party: the National Socialist

55 Walvin, p. 191.
56 Falola, pp. 40-41.
57 Akinwumi & Falola, p. 37.
58 R.S. Botwinick (1996), *A History of the Holocaust: from Ideology to Annihilation*, Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, p. 3.

German Workers' Party, or Nazi Party. Its success was largely due to the discontent among German society caused by the great defeat of Germany at the end of World War I: German people had lived through international humiliation and economic problems and they saw the Nazi Party as a possibility of social and economic progress. After his participation as an army volunteer in World War I, Adolf Hitler joined a small political party in Munich, the German Workers' Party, mainly composed of veterans. He completely changed the organisation of this party and renamed it National Socialist German Workers' Party. The main points of the political progam drafted in 1920 refer to the necessity to annex Austria, the revocation of the treaties ending World War I, Aryan superiority ideology, totalitarianism, and obviously antisemitic discrimination. The Nazi Party and its leader gained popularity in 1923, the year of a failed coup d'état planned by Hitler in Munich. He was sentenced to five years imprinsonment, during which he dictated his sadly famous book *Mein Kampf*.[59] Almost ten years later, in 1932, Hitler decided to run in the elections against Paul von Hindenburg, whose first presidential term had just ended. Using violence and threats, the Nazis only won thirty percent of the vote; but, later, in the Reichstag elections they won 230 seats, becoming the largest single party. Even if Hindenburg was against Hitler's appointment as chancellor, he was finally persauded to ask the Nazi leader to form a government.[60] Therefore, on January 30, 1933, Hitler became chancellor of Germany and later the same year asked for new elections. Hitler's election campaign was based on the violent repression of Communist and Socialist opposition. The Reichstag fire on 27 Februray, 1933, a week before the elections, played an important role in Nazi election propaganda: it was a Dutch communist who started the fire and this represented an obvious damage for the Communist Party. Moreover, Hitler used this terrible event to persuade Hindenburg to sign the so-called Enabling Act, abolishing some fundamental civil rights such as the right to free association and freedom of speech. Despite the illegal means used by the Nazis during the election campaign, they achieved a majority only in conjunction with the Nationalists. However, in 1934, when Hindenburg died, Hitler finally became president.[61]

59 Botwinick, pp. 54-58.
60 Botwinick, pp. 61-62.
61 L. Rees (2017), *L'Olocausto: una nuova storia*, Torino: Einaudi, pp. 70-75.

In 1935 Hitler decided to take concrete measures in order to exclude Jews from the social and political life of Germany. One of these measures is represented by the so-called Nuremberg Laws, according to which Jews were no longer considered as citizens of the Reich; furthermore, marriage and sexual relationships between Jews and Aryan people were prohibited; finally, Jews were forbidden to serve in the army. This edict marked the beginning of the systematic discrimination and persecution of Jews. The Nazis strengthened the antisemitic persecution during 1938, when Jews were forced to carry an indentification card with fingerprints and picture at all times: this was a way to control the "enemies of the state" and it helped the process of expulsion of thousands of foreign Jews to their homeland. The emigration of Jews was supported by another measure called Aryanization, that is the total exclusion of Jews from the national economic life by forcing them to sell their businesses and property to Aryans.[62] Almost the same methods were applied in Austia, where a dedicated office established in 1938, the "Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung", was responsible for the organisation of Jewish emigration: from March 1938 to the end of the year, nearly eighty thousand Austrian Jews left the country.[63] However, the proccess of expulsion of Jews was not so easy for the Nazi authorities: therefore, since many European countries had refused to accept Jewish refugees, in October 1938 Hitler decided to transport foreign Jews living in Germany across other European countries' borders. On 28 October, seventeen thousand Polish Jews living in Germany were indeed brought to the Polish border.[64] Among these deportees there was the family of Herschel Grynszpan, a young Polish Jew who was living in Paris in the hope of leaving for Palestine. On 7 November, 1938, he killed the Third Secretary of the German embassy in Paris, Ernst vom Rath, in order to avenge his family and his people. The reaction of the Nazi Party leadership was immediate and Joseph Goebbels, with Hitler's approval, ordered the destruction of Jewish homes and businesses: this brutal event taking place in the nights of November 9 and 10 is remembered as the Kristallnacht Pogrom.[65]

In September 1939, Hitler occupied Poland and the situation of Jewish people living

62 Botwinick, pp. 118-120.
63 Rees, p. 150.
64 Rees, p. 176.
65 Botwinick, p. 121.

there was as dramatic as that of German and Austrian Jews: they were indeed subject to social exclusion, discrimination and deportations. In October 1939, Hitler announced that the areas of Poland occupied by the Nazi army would be split into two parts: three districts of Western Poland would become part of the German nation; instead, the South-eastern regions close to the border with the Polish areas occupied by the Soviet Union would remain Polish, but they would become "judenrein"; in other words, all Polish Jews would be transported to South-eastern Poland and then forced to leave the German nation.[66] Therefore, Hitler's main aim was the "cleansing" of the regions of Poland under the Nazi occupation. During the first expulsions from the area, 1,800 Jews were indeed forced across the river Bug into Soviet territory. The deportations of Jews to Eastern Poland continued after 1939 and highly increased after the Nazi occupation of France, Holland, Belgium, Denmark and Norway because millions of Jews living in these countries were brought to Poland. At this point, the Nazis needed to find a way to control the great number of Jews deported to Poland. For this reason, they created ghettos in the major cities of the country: the largest ghettos were situated in Warsaw, Lodz, Cracow, Lublin and Lvov.[67] Concentrating Jews in Polish ghettos was one of a series of preparatory actions aiming at the total eradication of Jews from the occupied territories. The process of ghettoisation was thus particularly useful from the Nazis' point of view: first of all, ghettos were easily controlled because they were located in isolated and confined areas; secondly, Jews were forced to leave their homes and businesses before being deported to the ghettos and their property was usually bought by German agencies; thirdly, the centralisation of Jews in specific areas allowed the Nazis to organise their deportation to death camps quite easily and quickly; in addition, a great number of Jews did not survive the difficult life conditions of the ghettos and died even before their deportation. Apart from ghettoisation, another preparatory measure taken by the Nazis consisted of counting the number of Jews living in a designated region by confiscating the registers of Jewish congregations and associations. This process of identification was usually followed by the above-mentioned measures of Aryanization and forcible expulsion. All these preparatory

66 Rees, pp. 196-197.
67 Botwinick, p. 159-161.

actions represented the prelude to the final mass murder.[68]

It seems that the decision concerning the total destruction of all Jews within the Nazi territory, the so-called Final Solution, was taken on 20 January, 1942, during the Wannsee meeting. However, it is important to underline that this process of destruction had began earlier with the creation of Polish ghettos and the terrible operations of the mobile murder squads, that is the "Einsatzgruppen". They had followed the German armies in Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Soviet Union and shot hundreds of thousands of Jews. This killing method was soon abandoned because it was too traumatic for the Nazi killers; furthermore, many precious bullets were wasted and there were lots of witnesses to the executions. A more impersonal killing method is represented by the gas vans, where the inmates of certain concentration camps were asphyxiated. This method presented some problems as well: it was not possible to kill great numbers of Jews at the same time and the executioners were psychologically affected by the entire killing process. Finally, the installation of gas chambers in most of the death camps of Poland resulted to be the most effective killing method. The victims were told that they would have had a shower and, as soon as they were locked in the shower rooms, a gas known as Zyklon-B was propelled into the openings of the ceiling: in this way, the inmates did not immediately realise the true dramatic reason why they were there and the direct contact between the killers and the victims was minimal.[69]

It can be argued that the Nazi regime planned different strategies aiming at completely destroying the Jewish population living within its borders, but without concentration camps it could have never achieved such a great result. In the first major camps, such as Dachau, Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen, only political opponents were imprisoned: among the communists, the socialists, the labour union leaders and the members of the clergy imprisoned, there were always Jews, but at that early stage they did not represent the majority. The official purpose of these camps was indeed the re-education of the political opposition, but they were actually "death factories". The system grew quickly and three types of concentration camps were developed. The most known type comprises the killing centres, where the great majority of the prisoners were killed soon after their arrival: the main examples were the camps of Treblinka, Chelmo, Maidanek,

68 Botwinick, pp. 151-152.
69 Botwinick, pp. 181-183.

Belzec and Auschwitz-Birkenau. The second group includes the camps built near work sites, where inmates performed heavy labour and may have survived a few weeks or a few months: the largest ones were Gross-Rosen, Ravensbrück, Stutthof, Bergen-Belsen and Theresienstadt. In both these types of concentration camps the majority of the prisoners were Jewish. The third type of camps were designated as labour camps and their population was mainly composed of non-Jewish men and women deported from the occupied nations.[70]

Among the above-mentioned concentration camps, Auschwitz became sadly famous for the horrors its inmates experienced and is considered as a symbol of the Holocaust. It was the only Nazi camp where prisoners were tatooed with a number on their left forearm. Auschwitz was established in 1940 as a place of detention for many different categories of people declared dangerous by the Nazis: the largest number of prisoners were Jewish, but there were also Poles, Germans charged with crimes, Gypsies, pacifists and homosexuals. After June 1941, also Soviet prisoners of war were imprisoned there and were the first to die in the newly installed gas chambers. After the Wannsee conference in 1942, Jews from all over Europe began to be deported to Auschwitz en masse. Between 1941 and 1944 the camp was enlarged and it was possible to distinguish different areas: Auschwitz I, which was the main camp; Auschwitz II, that is the Birkenau "death factory"; Auschwitz III, also called Monowitz, which was the slave-labour camp. In order to control such a vast territory the Nazis should have needed a lot of personnel, but SS guards were actually kept at a minimum because some inmates were used to supervise other inmates, empty the trains transporting deportees, remove the corpses from the gas chambers and the luckiest ones worked in the offices: they were called "Sonderkommandos". "Kapos", instead, were prisoners who had to maintain a rigid discipline in specific areas of the camp and make work assignments for the group of inmates they supervised.[71] Moreover, some prisoners helped doctor Josef Mengele, who arrived in the camp in 1943 to experiment on twins and dwarfs. Another element distinguishing Auschwitz from the other death camps was thus Mengele's brutal medical experimentations, which killed several innocent human beings. The period between May and July, 1944 was marked by the highest number of deaths in the entire

70 Botwinick, p. 152.
71 Botwinick, pp. 186-188.

history of the camp: during that period, nearly 430 thousand Jews were deported to Auschwitz from Hungary and the majority of them were immediately killed at their arrival.[72]

In the late winter of 1944, it was almost clear that Germany would be defeated: between the end of 1944 and early spring of 1945, the Soviet armies indeed reached Poland and the Western Allies occupied Southern Italy and crossed into Germany from France. At this point, the Nazis worried about destroying the evidence of the terrible crimes they committed in the concentration camps: therefore, gassings were stopped, gas chambers and crematoria were destroyed, corpses were burnt and the reamaining prisoners were marched to camps in central Germany.[73] On 12 January, 1945, the Soviet armies encircled Cracow, a city which is less than fifty kilometers far from Auschwitz; as a consequence, the SS guards were ordered to march about 58 thousand prisoners out of the camp and leave there nearly 9 thousand ill inmates, who would not have been able to resist the exhaustion of the long march. These inmates should have been killed by the Nazis, but many of them survived because the SS guards preferred to escape before the arrival of the Soviet armies.[74]

The history of the Third Reich, directly related to that of the Holocaust, ended with Hitler's suicide on 30 April, 1945. On 7 May, the unconditional surrender of Germany was announced in Reims, in France, and the day after the Soviet armies finally defeated the Nazi forces in Berlin.[75]

1.3 The possible connections between the collective traumas of the slave trade and the Holocaust

Although there are obvious differences, in terms of time and reasons, between the slave trade and the Holocaust, these traumatic historical events have both produced a collective memory, that is “a form of remembrance that grounded the identity-formation of a people”.[76] The idea that these traumas have both created a collective memory resulting from interaction can help underline the common elements they share. In

72 Rees, p. 483.
73 Botwinick, p. 197.
74 Rees, p. 506.
75 Rees, p. 521.
76 Eyerman, p.1.

addition, it could be interesting to expand the concept of collective memory to include not only the historical events related to a single people, but also the traumatic memory concerning different peoples and cultures. This last statement can explain what Michael Rothberg calls "multidirectional memory". In his essay *From Gaza to Warsaw: Mapping Multidirectional Memory*, Rothberg argues that

> "collective memories of seemingly distinct histories – such as those of slavery, the Holocaust, and colonialism – are not so easily separable from one another."[77]

In particular, Rothberg highlights how the possibility for a marginalised community to articulate a form of public collective memory may lead other oppressed social groups to create their own collective memory, which can help them fight for recognition and justice. In order to clarify this point, Rothberg provides the example of the African American scholar and activist W.E.B Du Bois, who in 1949 visited the Jewish ghetto in Warsaw. This trip, which is recounted in his short article *The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto*, allows him to see the race problem from a totally different point of view: the comparison between anti-black racism and antisemitism shows that racial discrimination does not exclusively depend on skin colour, physical features, belief or status, but it rather relates to culture, education, hate and prejudice; for this reason, discrimination can reach all sorts of people. Admitting the relationality at the basis of different histories of racial violence and the "multidirectionality" of the race problem, Du Bois was able to reinterpret and rethink the African American past and present in the light of the history of the Holocaust.[78] Rothberg uses the experience of Du Bois as a clear example of the possibility to analyse divergent histories in connection with each other.

Completely in opposition to this "multidirectional" vision is the idea that the increase of public attention to the Holocaust could result in less attention to the slave trade. Geoffrey Hartman, for instance, underlines how the exceptionality which is usually associated with the history of the Holocaust is likely to cause tension between Jews and coloured people in America. Hartman quotes Toni Morrison's dedication in her novel *Beloved*, in which she refers to the sixty million victims of the middle passage: this number is about ten times larger than that of the victims of the Holocaust and it can be

77 M. Rothberg (2011), "From Gaza to Warsaw: Mapping Multidirectional Memory", *Criticism*, p. 524.
78 Rothberg, p. 527.

seen as the attempt to make the reader aware that the consequences of the slave trade were as dramatic as those of the Holocaust, or even worse.[79] However, this kind of parallel conceiving of the two traumas as competing with each other appears to be ineffective for a better understanding of both historical tragedies. This is why, in line with Rothberg's statement about the possible advantages of the articulation of a colllective memory including the histories of different communities, Irene Visser claims that

> The histories of trauma of the Holocaust, slavery, and colonialism re-enacted through narrative, must not be considered as contesting for primacy, but rather as non-contesting and co-existing, from a recognition that collectively held traumatic memories resonate profoundly.[80]

Similarly, Paul Gilroy, in his extremely relevant work *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, states that the uniqueness usually linked to the horrors of the Holocaust may hinder a possible combined discussion about the common elements characterising the Holocaust and the slave trade. According to Gilroy, a combined analysis could be useful for a deeper understanding of modern racisms. Therefore, considering these traumatic events as "non-contesting" histories and underlining both their differences and their similarities can represent an attempt to have a broader view on the ideologies that have led to such terrible crimes against humanity. Gilroy adds that

> the possibility that there might be something useful to be gained from setting these histories closer to each other not so as to compare them, but as precious resources from which we might learn something valuable about the way that modernity operates, about the scope and status of rational human conduct, about the claims of science, and perhaps most importantly about the ideologies of humanism with which these brutal histories can be shown to have been complicit.[81]

This passage is also taken into account by Lars Eckstein in his book *Re-Membering the Black Atlantic: On the Poetics and Politics of Literary Memory*, in which he stresses that Gilroy aims at bringing together discourses of the Jewish genocide and the Atlantic slave trade in order to explore the reasons at the basis of modern racisms and the complicity of humanist ideology with historical discrimination and brutalization.[82] In the second chapter of the same work, Eckstein focuses on the writer Caryl Phillips, who seems to apply Gilroy's combined discussion in his novel *The Nature of Blood* (1997).

79 Hartman, p. 5.
80 Andermahr, p. 9.
81 P. Gilroy (1995), *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Conscoiusness*, London and New York: Verso, p. 217.
82 L. Eckstein (2006), *Re-Membering the Black Atlantic: On the Poetics and Politics of Literary Memory*, Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, p. 226.

Up to this point, the notion of "multidirectional memory" has been explored through the analysis of some essays and research studies; however *The Nature of Blood* represents one example of the possibility of using literature to deal with arguably interconnected historical traumas. In this novel, the central plot concerning the German-Jewish Holocaust survivor Eva Stern and her family is constantly interwoven with other narratives dealing with the Jewish and African diasporas, life in Renaissance Venice and present-day Israel. Eckstein also underlines that a similar literary strategy is used by Phillips in a previous novel first published in 1989, *Higher Ground*: the last narrative fragment of this novel tells the story of a lonely Caribbean immigrant meeting a Polish Holocaust survivor in London.[83] In these two novels, Phillips is able to show the possible connections between discourses of anti-black racism and antisemitism, by depicting history as a cyclical process, in which the events are both spatially and temporally distant, and at the same time close to each other. In an essay about *The Nature of Blood*, Bénédicte Ledent uses the metaphor of the labyrinth to explain this cyclical and global conception of history:

> The labyrinth, as an ancestral symbol connoting multiplicity, ambiguity and meandering, therefore alerts us to the age-long existence of cultural interweaving as part of a universal history of ideas.[84]

The concept of "cultural interweaving" is the basic assumption for the deveolopment of a "transcultural empathy" which can enable different cultures marked by different types of traumas to come into contact and understand the other's trauma. This process characterised by both differentiation and solidarity is defined by Stef Craps as "cross-traumatic affiliation" and, using Craps's words, it can be described as

> a way of bringing different historical traumas into contact in an ethically responsible manner; that is, without collapsing them into one another, preserving the distance between them.[85]

In this sense, traumatic experiences related to different communities remain distinct, but a particular community should be able to interpret the trauma experienced by another social group on the basis of its own trauma. In this way, "cross-traumatic affiliation" avoids "homogenization" of different traumas and recognises the uniqueness and the difference of each community's experience while, at the same time, enabling an

83 Eckstein, pp. 65-67.
84 B. Ledent (2001), "A Fictional and Cultural Labyrinth: Caryl Phillips's *The Nature of Blood*", *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, p. 187.
85 Andermahr, p. 111.

interconneted interpretation of trauma. Much like Rothberg, Craps suggests an ethical thinking which stresses the importance of solidarity regardless of a "hierarchy of victmhood" and denies the possibility of the primacy of a traumatic event on another.[86]

Having demonstrated the possibility of developing a combined ethical discussion about different historical traumas, some conclusions about the actual connections between the slave trade and the Holocaust can now be drawn. Firstly, the two peoples involved in these atrocities seem to share a similar history of servitude and suffering. This idea is supported by Gilroy, who refers to an important black thinker of the 19th century, Edward Wilmot Blyden, in order to draw a parallel between the history of black slavery and that of the Jews, who were considered by the ancient Egyptians and later by the Romans as the "servants of all".[87] The main difference between black and Jewish slaves concerns their physical appearance: medieval Christians forced all Jews to wear special clothing or a yellow spot on their clothes in order to distinguish them from non-Jewish Europeans; on the contrary, dark skin and other peculiar physical features became inherent markers for the classification of blacks as "natural slaves".[88] If Europeans needed external markers to identify Jewish slaves, anti-black discrimination was justified by particular physical features. In different ways, both blacks and Jews lived through a past characterised by slavery and racial persecution. For instance, in medieval Spain and Portugal, the Jews who converted to Catholicism, called "conversos", were excluded from certain professions; moreover, in 1492 Christian antisemitism led to the expulsion of Jews from Spain and in 1497 Jews were forced to leave Portugal, unless they converted to Christianity. It could be said that almost the same prejudices and practices which characterised medieval antisemitism were later used by Spaniards and Portuguese for the treatment of newly imported blacks.[89]

Secondly, a possible link between these specific groups is represented by suffering and dehumanization. Gilroy, quoting Fredric Jameson, describes the pain defining black and Jewish history in terms of fear and vulnerability: a clear example of this is ghetto life, characterised by the constant fear of a possible lynching, pogrom or race riot.[90] The

86 Andermahr, p. 111.
87 Gilroy, p. 210.
88 Davis, p. 53.
89 Davis, p. 72.
90 Gilroy, p. 206.

level of dehumanization in the histories of these peoples seems to have reached its culmination during the slave trade and the Holocaust. A significant example of this is offered by the inhuman conditions in which black slaves were brought to the New World and Jews from all over Europe were deported to Nazi camps. The means of transport were different, ships for African slaves and trains for Jewish deportees, but the journey was awful in both cases; as a result, a great number of blacks and Jews died even before reaching their final destination. Therefore, another element the slave trade and the Holocaust have in common is the terrible experience of deportations. David Brion Davis, describing the conditions on transatlantic slave ships, indeed explains that:

> The males, especially, had to lie like spoons locked together, with no real standing room above them, surrounded by urine and feces, with little air to breathe. One would need to turn to the suffering of slaves in ancient Greek silver mines or to the victims of Nazi death camps to find worse or roughly equivalent examples of what Eltis calls "sheer awfulness".[91]

Similarly, Gilroy underlines how Primo Levi's description of the terrible nature of the journey to the camp and his reference to the namelessness characterising the new inmates of the camp can easily find their equivalents in the history of black slavery.[92] The inmates who arrived in the concentration camp of Auschwitz were marked with a number tatooed on their left forearm; in this way, they were no longer identified by their names, but they were simply considered as numbers. Also African slaves transported to the Americas lost their names, because they were usually given new names by their masters. This namelessness can be seen as part of a complex process of dehumanization which involved the victims of both the slave trade and the Holocaust. Therefore, it can be said that the victims of these historical traumas were not seen as human beings and, for this reason, they were treated like animals. According to Stanley Cavell, slavers, plantation owners or overseers were able to consider slaves as animals because it was impossible for them to see the souls of their slaves: they were "soul blind". Christopher Hamilton links Cavell's discussion of slavery with the process of dehumanization applied by the Nazis in the death camps:

> It is evident that the Nazis were, like the slave owner, not capable of seeing the souls of their prisoners. […] This idea is linked to the meaning that a life has to a person. In effect, the Nazis said to their victims that their life had no meaning.[93]

91 Davis, p. 92.
92 Gilroy, p. 215.
93 M. Voulehainen & A. Chapman (2016), *Interpreting Primo Levi: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 76.

Another concept which is central to the histories of both blacks and Jews is diaspora. As already stated in the introduction, diaspora is one of the main consequences of historical trauma and can be described by some general features listed by Rubin Cohen in his work *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. The condition of exile and forced separation from the homeland is one of the main features of this pheomenon and was experienced by black slaves in the period of the slave trade and by Jewish people both in ancient times and during World War II. In addition, the notion of diaspora can also include the aim of coming back to the point of origin: one of the proposals at the basis of pan-Africanist politics was indeed the foundation of an independent black nation state in Africa or elsewhere, and this kind of project also characterises Jewish history. For all these reasons, Gilroy can claim that

> the concept of diaspora can itself provide an underutilised device with which to explore the fragmentary relationship between blacks and Jews and the difficult political questions to which it plays host: the status of ethnic identity, the power of cultural nationalism, and the manner in which carefully preserved social histories of ethnocidal suffering can function to supply ethical and political legitimacy.[94]

Finally, these historical traumas are both characterised by slavery, suffering, dehumanization, deportations and diaspora and they can be analysed as part of a larger historical, political and economic process that embeds the slave trade and the Holocaust into a continuum including colonialism, slavery, capitalism and the Nazi regime. As previously mentioned, one of the main reasons at the basis of the slave trade was economic: the free labour of African slaves in the plantations of the American colonies was essential for the development of the European capitalist system and the growth of Western consumeristic societies, spoiled by slave-produced sugar, coffee, tobacco, and eventually chocolate. This relation between the slave trade and capitalism is also stressed by Davis, who, referring to the historian Stanley Elkins, states that

> [Elkins] argued in a famous book that as a result of unmitigated capitalism, slavery in the United States became so uniquely severe and oppressive, especially in its affliction of psychological damage, that it could be compared to the Nazi concentration camps that supposedly reduced many victims to the absolute dependency of "the perpetual child".[95]

This quotation is particularly interesting in the context of "cross-traumatic affiliation" because Elkins, after identifying slavery as a consequence of "unmitigated capitalism",

94 Gilroy, p. 207.
95 Davis, p. 207.

seems to make a clear comparison between the psychological oppression deriving from colonial slavery and the brutalization of Nazi camps. The possible links between colonialism and the camps are at the core of Mark Mazower's *Hitler's Empire* (2008), which is briefly reviewed by Bryan Cheyette in *Decolonizing Trauma Studies: Trauma and Postcolonialism*. Cheyette underlines that the system of the Nazi camps appears to be based on a colonial model exploiting slave labour and on an exterminatory model justified by "race" theory.[96] However, even though it could be said that there is a connection in terms of means and ideology between the system of colonial slavery and the concentration camps, Davis identifies some differences between African slaves working in the colonial plantations and the camps' inmates. First of all, the prisoners of the Nazi camps were "worthless" workers, in the sense that their labour was not fundamental for the regime's economy and it was rather a way to exhaust the inmates. Therfore, their life was not so profitable in the eyes of the Nazi authorities, because their main aim was the extermination of the prisoners. On the contrary, chattel slaves represented an investment in the New World and their labour was extremely important from an economic point of view. Secondly, being in effect "useless" workers, the concentration camps' inmates, in opposition to black slaves, were not defined as "property that could be owned, purchased, or inherited". As a result, Davis describes two different kinds of slavery and coerced labour which share dehumanizing means and racial discrimination, but still present some evident differences.[97] Nevertheless, taking into consideration Cheyette's reflection on *Hitler's Empire* once again, it is possible to interpret the Holocaust as a continuation of the colonial project. Hitler's politics and war strategies can indeed be described as the Nazi attempt to colonise Europe: Mazower shows that the colonisation of the American continent and the British colonies in Africa and Asia represented two great models for Hitler's intended colonisation of Europe.[98] Moreover, Cheyette points out that it can be useful to combine the supposedly separate historical events of colonialism, the slave trade and the Holocaust in a unified history and that this separation was introduced only after the 1960s:

> up until the 1960s, in relation to an anti-colonial critique, none of these areas were separated out; they were seen as part of the same history: colonialism, fascism, genocide, racism. So it's really only after

96 Andermahr, p. 193.
97 Davis, pp. 329-330.
98 Andermahr, p. 193.

the 1960s that discussion of these areas began to be "disciplined".[99]

It could be interesting to conclude with a remarkable literary example which shows the relationship between the notions of "postmemory" and "cross-traumatic affiliation" and their understanding in the context of a unified and cyclical conception of history. The reference here is to a poem written by Primo Levi in 1978, *La bambina di Pompei*.

Poiché l'angoscia di ciascuno è la nostra
ancora riviviamo la tua, fanciulla scarna
che ti sei stretta convulsamente a tua madre
quasi volessi ripenetrare in lei
quando al meriggio il cielo si è fatto nero.
Invano, perché l'aria volta in veleno
è filtrata a cercarti per le finestre serrate
della tua casa tranquilla dalle robuste pareti
lieta già del tuo canto e del tuo timido riso.
Sono passati i secoli, la cenere si è pietrificata
a incarcerare per sempre codeste membra gentili.
Così tu rimani fra noi, contorto calco di gesso,
agonia senza fine, terribile testimonianza
di quanto importi agli dei l'orgoglioso nostro seme.
Ma nulla rimane fra noi della tua lontana sorella,
della fanciulla d'Olanda murata fra quattro mura
che pure scrisse la sua giovinezza senza domani:
la sua cenere muta è stata dispersa dal vento,
la sua breve vita rinchiusa in un quaderno sgualcito.
Nulla rimane della scolara di Hiroshima,
ombra confitta nel muro dalla luce di mille soli.
Vittima sacrificata sull'altare della paura.
Potenti della terra padroni di nuovi veleni,
tristi custodi segreti del tuono definitivo,
ci bastano d'assai le afflizioni donate dal cielo.
Prima di premere il dito, fermatevi e considerate.

20 novembre 1978[100]

This poem deals with three different traumatic events represented by three young and vulnerable female figures: "la bambina di Pompei", "la fanciulla d'Olanda" (referring to Anna Frank) and "la scolara di Hiroshima". In these lines, Levi is able to create a connection between the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, the Holocaust and the atomic bomb explosion in Hiroshima. The places related to these historical traumas, that is Pompeii, Auschwitz and Hiroshima, are far away from each other and the events took place in different times; however, Levi interprets them as part of a universal dimension that can be described as "cross-traumatic". The main difference that Levi seems to

99 Andermahr, p. 193.
100 P. Levi (2017), *Ad ora incerta*, Milano: Garzanti, pp. 42-43.

underline between these traumas is related to the opposition between a natural catastrophe, that is the volcanic eruption, and two crimes committed by human beings. Nevertheless, human beings are depicted as powerless to react to both natural forces and man-made terrible products and this helplessness is well stressed by the line in which Levi writes: “ci bastano d'assai le afflizioni donate dal cielo”. This human weakness appears to bring together the three dramatic events, which are combined in a single painful memory regardless of temporal borders. The use of the posessive collective pronoun “la nostra” and the verb “riviviamo”, characterised by the prefix “ri-” symbolising repetition, serves as a means to involve the reader, who did not live through these traumas, in a personal process of indirect memory.[101] This kind of memory can be described as “postmemory”, which Hirsch defines as a set of traumatic memories shared across individuals and generations. Moreover, Hirsch considers “postmemory” as a possibility to interpret different histories alongside and in connection with each other.[102] This poem seems to be characterised by the same universal and “cross-traumatic” interpretation of history: the presence of three extremely distant traumas in the same poem shows that a comparative discussion about different historical events is possible. Levi, presenting three traumas side by side and avoiding a “hierarchy of victmood”, is able to demonstrate that a “cross-traumatic” comparison is not only possible, but also useful for a better understanding of our past and the preservation of traumatic memory.

101 M. A. Mariani (2018), *Primo Levi e Anna Frank: tra testimonianza e letterartura*, Roma: Carrocci, pp. 103-105.
102 Hirsch, p. 31.

The role of literature in the representation of trauma

2.1 *The Lamplighter* by Jackie Kay

Jackie Kay was born in Edinburgh in 1961 to a Scottish mother and a Nigerian father. She was adopted by a white Scottish couple at birth and grew up in Glasgow. The experience of adoption and being both black and Scottish marked her entire life and literary production.

She studied at Stirling University and her career started in the 1980s, when she joined different groups of black feminist activists and artists in the context of what has been called "Black British Renaissance", a political and ideological movement aiming at challenging the postwar acceptance of the definition of "race" and the popular understanding of blackness in British society. In this early period, Kay collaborated with other poets, writers and activits in a series of collective publications: *A Dangerous Knowing. Four Black Women Poets* (1984), *Charting the Journey. Writings by Black and Third World Women* (1988), and *Gay Sweatshop. Four Plays and a Company* (1989). These works are characterised by the acknowledgement of blackness, feminism and a strong criticism of Margaret Thatcher's racist politics.[103] Thatcherite racism can indeed be described, using Gilroy's definition, as "New Racism": it is not based on a hierarchical biological classification of "races", it rather relates to the association between a culture and a specific national context.[104] Kay's personal story obviously denies this clear-cut definition because of her hybrid identity, which is at the core of many of her works.

After these first provocative and politically engaged works, the rest of Kay's production is characterised by a more positive attitude towards inter-racial communication. The first example of this is her first poetry collection, *The Adoption Papers* (1991), in which Kay has adapted some personal experiences into literary form: the poems focus on three female protagonists, the adoptive mother, the biological mother and the daughter. Her second collection, *Other Lovers* (1993), deals with modern black cultural production,

103 C.R. Gonzáles (2015), "Re-charting the Black Atlantic: Jackie Kay's Cartographies of the Self", *Études* écossaises, pp. 104-105.

104 A. Oboe (2012), "Arte di tenebra? Paul Gilroy e il discorso razziale nella cultura inglese contemporanea", *Scritture migranti*, p. 237.

love, family and Scottish tradition. These poems explore the important meaning of music in the black diasporic context and this is also the main topic of Kay's first novel, *Trumpet* (1998). In the same year, she published her third collection called *Off Colour*, focusing on racial bigotry, gender discrimination and homophobia. Both her fourth collection, *Life Mask* (2005), and her book of stories *Wish I Was Here* (2006) deal with loss, loneliness and broken relationships between women. In 2010 Kay wrote *Red Dust Road*, an autobiographical narrative concerning her encounter with her biological father in Nigeria and with her biological mother in Scotland. Apart from novels and poetry, Kay also writes books for children.[105]

The above-mentioned works won lots of prestigious awards and in 2003 Kay received a Cholmondeley Award by the Society of Authors; furthermore, in 2006 she was awarded an MBE for services to literature. Kay is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, a Professor of Creative Writing at Newcastle University and she also writes for stage, radio and television.[106]

In 2007 Kay was asked to write something as part of the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade and the result of this proposition was *The Lamplighter*. Surprisingly, her first reaction was not enthusiastic and she explained why in an article published in *The Guardian* on 24 March 2007:

> When the producer Pam Fraser Solomon first asked me to write something to mark the 200th anniversary of abolition, I replied that I thought enough had been written about slavery, and that I didn't want to be pigeonholed as a black writer. Black writers are often expected to write about slavery and race. I also thought I knew a lot about the period, and had written the odd poem.[107]

This initial refusal can be interpreted as Kay's unconscious reluctance to deal with the traumatic memory of slavery because addressing the "rememory", using Toni Morrison's term, of the slave trade means reliving an extremely traumatic past. Obviously, Kay did not experience the trauma of slavery directly; however, exploring this collective memory may be extremely painful also for those people who did not live through these dramatic events, but feel equally connected to them for different cultural, social and political reasons. This process of "rememory" and "renewal" appears to be linked to the previously mentioned concept of "postmemory", which refers to "a

105 Gonzáles, pp. 106-114.
106 M. Gee (2010), "Stories and Survival. An Interview with Jackie Kay", *Wasafiri*, p. 19.
107 J. Kay (2007), "Missing Faces", *The Guardian*, p. 1.

traumatic experience that is inherited rather than witnessed first-hand".[108] This interpretation that describes Kay's initial reluctance to write about the slave trade as a traumatic effect of "postmemory" can be confirmed by Kay's own words in an interview by Nick Thorpe, where she defines the writing process at the basis of *The Lamplighter* as a "trail back to her own past":

> In a sense I was on a trail back to my own past. A lot of the original Africans were taken from the West Coast of Africa, where my father came from. So I was thinking if I trace back my family tree far enough I would find slaves.[109]

Therefore, for Kay it was quite natural to feel an emphatic and profound connection with the history of the slave trade, but in order to better convey the harsh reality of slavery, she also needed historic sources. Kay worked on original testimonies of the 18th century and she realised that she did not know much about that period. *The Lamplighter* is thus the outcome of an intense archival research which allows Kay to write a "love letter to her ancestors".[110]

The Lamplighter, variously defined as radio play, epic poem or dramatised poem, was first broadcast on BBC radio on Sunday 25 March 2007 and published one year later. This unconventional work can be categorised under the label of "neo-slave narrative" or "contemporary narrative of slavery". The definition of "neo-slave narratives" was first introduced by Bernard Bell in 1987 to describe the "residually oral" fictions dealing with slavery published in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. This term is now used more generally to refer to all contemporary works about slavery. Nonetheless, Ashraf H. A. Rushdy uses this expression in a more restrictive sense: he indeed defines "neo-slave narratives" as fictional texts aiming at recreating the original "slave narratives" directly written or dictated by former slaves.[111] Therefore, this kind of fictions are not based on the testimonies of people directly involved in slavery, but, as previously noted, they rather represent "postmemories". This aspect can be considered as a negative feature because "neo-slave narratives" appear to lack the authenticity of direct experience; however, in her essay *The Site of Memory*, Toni Morrison underlines

108 P. Tournay-Theodotou (2014 a), "Love Letter to My Ancestors: Representing Traumatic Memory in Jackie Kay's *The Lamplighter*", *Atlantis:Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies*, p. 163.

109 N. Thorpe (2007), "Jackie Kay. Interview", *Sunday Times*, p. 3.

110 Kay (2007), p. 3.

111 S. Muñoz-Valdivieso (2012), "Neo-Slave Narratives in Contemporary Black British Fiction", *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, p. 43.

how the narrators of original “slave narratives” usually omitted some events they had experienced because they were unable to bear the pain of those memories. Referring to the former slaves who decided to tell their story, she claims that:

> In shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they were silent about many things, and they "forgot" many other things.[112]

In addition, Morrison states that in “slave narratives” the interior life of slaves was not explored; therefore, she suggests that one possible positive aspect of “neo-slave narratives” is represented by the possibility to “rip that veil drawn over” those events that seemed too terrible to be remembered and to use imagination for the recollection of the traumatic past of slavery.[113] In line with Morrison's contribution, *The Lamplighter*, like every other “neo-slave narratives”, can be described as follows:

> All slavery novels attempt to imagine the experiences that were not captured in the original slave narratives, and they implicitly produce a reconsideration and re-evaluation of slavery and its legacy.[114]

Although “neo-slave narratives”, like the original “slave narratives”, are mostly related to African-American culture, there are also some cases of fictions about slavery written, for instance, in Canada, the Caribbean and Great Britain. This shows that these works cannot be seen as part of a “nation-specific literary canon”, but they relate to a transnational and diasporic theoretical perspective.[115] This is exactly the kind of perspective chosen by Kay, a black Scottish writer, whose personal life clearly represents the impossibility of a straight connection between cultural identity and national borders.

The Lamplighter can be said to belong to the genre of “neo-slave narratives” because of these main features: the choice of a first person narration, the use of archival sources and the reference to historic characters and events that have been fictionalised. However, there are some other aspects that are in opposition to the conventions and forms of this literary genre: the use of poetry instead of the typical literary form used in “neo-slave narratives”, namely the novel; the dramatic structure of the work, that is its division into scenes; from a thematic point of view, the emphasis on the involvement of

112 W. Zinsser (1995), I*nventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, New York: Houghton Mifflin, p. 91.
113 Zinsser, pp. 91-92.
114 Muñoz-Valdivieso, pp. 54-55.
115 A. Nadalini (2011), “A New British Grammar: Jackie Kay's *The Lamplighter*”, *Black Arts in Britain*, p. 53.

Scotland in the slave trade; finally, the polyphony and fragmentation of the work.[116]

What is particularly interesting about *The Lamplighter* is its exploration of a part of Scottish history that is usually forgotten: Scotland's historical participation in the commerce of African slaves. Through the words and memories of her characters, Kay is able to denounce that the economic development of the United Kingdom in modern times mostly depended on slavery and that Scotland profited from the British slave trade. In the article *Missing Faces*, Kay indeed argues that

> It's a not so delicious irony that the anniversary of the bicentenary is also the bicentenary of the union between Scotland and England, which allowed Scotland to profit from the slave trade in a big way, and changed the face of Glasgow in particular.[117]

The Lampllighter gives Kay the possibility to offer a perspective which differs from the official version concerning the history of the slave trade: in the official historical accounts, Scotland is usually portrayed as the victim of the colonial system, rather than the perpetrator. Kay's aim seems to be that of reversing this biased interpretation of history.[118]

Kay's dramatised poem can be defined as a polyphonic work because the trauma of slavery is explored through the different, and at the same time interwoven, experiences of four African women: Constance, Mary, Black Harriot and Lamplighter. Another important character is Aniwaa, a young African girl captured by slave traders, separated from her family and imprisoned at Cape Coast Castle waiting to be sold to the slave trade. Later in the work, readers find out that Aniwaa and Lamplighter are the same person and this “doubleness” represents Aniwaa's “split personality”, due to the trauma of slavery. The individual experiences of the women slaves present some similarities concerning oppression, captivity, racial discrimination, sexual harrassment, forced labour and both the necessity and pain of remembering. These interconnected stories form a sort of polyphonic dialogue, in which “any single story is a multiple one”. This dialogue is regularly interrupted by the only male voice of the work: MacBean, who represents the white dominant discourse supporting slavery.[119] This polyphony, focusing on the point of view of the oppressed but also including the voice of the oppressor, can

116 Nadalini, p. 53.
117 Kay (2007), p. 1.
118 Nadalini, p. 53.
119 Gonzáles, pp. 114-115.

be a powerful means to "subvert the master narrative of history".[120]

In conclusion, it is important to underline that, having put at the centre of her work the point of view of black women slaves, Kay wrote a "neo-slave narrative" that can be related to a tradition of female-authored texts investigating the condition of black women under slavery and trying to "rewrite" official memory. This tradition started in the 1970s as a consequence of the expanding black feminist movement in the United States.[121] Though dealing with the same main topics characterising this tradition, namely gender, blackness and slavery, in *The Lamplighter* Kay moves the focus away from the United States and rather highlights Britain and Scotland's involvement in the slave trade. For all these reasons, *The Lamplighter* can finally be defined as a "feminist postmemory", which, through the perspective of black women slaves, may enable an ethical and political understanding of the distant trauma of slavery.[122]

2.2 *Se questo è un uomo* by Primo Levi

The whole work of Primo Levi can be described as the fragmented narration of the memory of a trauma. The traumatic experience of Auschwitz is relived and explored in several genres and tones, inspiring in different ways the totality of Levi's books.[123] In the appendix Levi added to the 1976 edition of *Se questo è un uomo*, in order to answer the most common questions students used to ask him, he states that if he had not been an inmate of Auschwitz, he would probably not have become a writer. His main profession was actually another one: he studied Chemistry at the University of Turin, he was able to graduate despite the racial laws introduced by the Fascist government in 1938, and in 1942 he started working as a chemist for a Swiss medicine factory in Milan.[124] The world of literature and that of Chemistry appear to be completely different, as Levi himself stresses in the above-mentioned appendix, and this is why he explains that before entering the lager, he had never thought of writing a book:

> È stata l'esperienza del Lager a costringermi a scrivere: non ho avuto da combattere con la pigrizia, i problemi di stile mi sembravano ridicoli, ho trovato miracolosamente il tempo di scrivere pur senza

120 Muñoz-Valdivieso, p. 44.
121 Nadalini, p. 52.
122 Tournay-Theodotou (2014 a), p. 180.
123 M. A. Mariani (2011), *Sull'autobiografia contemporanea. Nathalie Sarraute, Elias Canetti, Alice Munro, Primo Levi*, Roma: Carrocci, p. 22.
124 M. Porro (2017), *Primo Levi*, Bologna: Il mulino, p. 177.

> mai sottrarre neppure un'ora al mio mestiere quotidiano: mi pareva, questo libro, di averlo già in testa pronto, di doverlo solo lasciare uscire e scendere sulla carta.[125]

Therefore, the origin of trauma is explored in Levi's very first book, *Se questo è un uomo*, which starts from Levi's arrest in Aosta Valley on 13 December 1943: he was arrested in Brusson, where he was part of a group of partisans, and then imprisoned in the concentration camp of Carpi-Fòssoli. In February 1944, he left this concentration camp and was deported to Auschwitz.[126]

The narration of this traumatic experience does not end with Levi's survival to the lager, it rather continues in his second work, *La Tregua*, published in 1963. In this book, which won the first edition of the Campiello Prize in Venice, Levi remembers the time immediately after his liberation from Auschwitz, when he worked as a nurse in a Soviet camp in Katowice. In June 1945, the long journey back to Italy began: Levi and the other survivors crossed White Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Hungary and Austria, until they finally reached Italy on 19 October. Levi decided to write this book long after the publication of *Se questo è un uomo*, when his first work had already had great success and while he was the manager of a small paint factory near Turin, called Siva. Although he was very busy with his profession as a chemist, he was able to write regularly, precisely a chapter every month.[127]

It seems clear that the first works by Levi are directly connected to his experience as an inmate and a survivor of Auschwitz; however, between 1964 and 1967, he wrote some short stories dealing with the technological world of labs and factories, the two places where Levi spent much of his time. These short stories were published in the Italian magazine *Il Giorno* and then collected in a book called *Storie naturali*. Levi published this work under the pseudonym of Damiano Malabaila, as suggested by Ernesto Ferrero, advisor of the publishing house Einaudi. This choice is very curious and it appears to reveal a sort of guilt on the part of the author, who for the first time does not write about his experience as a survivor and witness. Nevertheless, according to Francesco Cassata, *Storie naturali* is characterised by the typical enstrangement related to science-fiction and this particular feature seems to be functional to reinterpret the paradoxical logic at

125 P. Levi (2014), *Se questo è un uomo*, Torino: Einaudi, p. 190.
126 Porro, p. 178.
127 Levi (2014), pp. 215-216.

the basis of the inexplicable world of Auschwitz. Therefore, even if these short stories do not represent a historical testimony and they do not deal with the trauma directly experienced by Levi, they can be read as a different attempt to understand the trauma of the Holocaust. The same can be said for another collection of short stories called *Vizio di forma*: Levi published this work in 1971, this time using his real name.[128]

When in 1975, Levi decided to retire from Siva's management, he devoted all of his time to literature and in the same year he collected his poems in a work called *L'osteria di Brema* and published *Il sistema periodico*. This book can be considered as the first work by Levi, in which Chemistry and literature are combined: the protagonist is indeed a chemist and the main purpose of the author appears to be the description of the "spiritual adventures" of a chemist.[129] *Il sistema periodico* is composed of a series of short stories, whose titles refer to different chemical elements. The Canadian-American writer Saul Bellow expressed an extremely positive judgement on this book and thanks to him Levi's work became popular in the United States. As in the case of the previous collections of short stories, namely *Storie naturali* and *Vizio di forma*, *Il sistema periodico* does not exclusively deal with Levi's detention in Auschwitz, though the lager does not completely disappear and there are several implicit and explicit references to it.[130] In this collection, work is a very central topic and it is even more explored in a work of 1978, *La chiave a stella*, a novel whose protagonist is Libertino Faussone, a specialised worker leaving Turin to carry out important projects in different regions of the world.[131]

In 1980 the publishing house Einaudi asked Levi to create a selection of books which he considered meaningful in his life. These collected works became a book called *La ricerca delle radici* and it would have been part of a bigger publishing project including different authors, who were asked to collect their favourite works in a single book. Levi was the only author who actually accomplished this task, probably because this work became an opportunity to tell his personal life story through the words of the authors he loved the most. Every selected work included in *La ricerca delle radici* is indeed

128 Porro, pp. 82-83.
129 Porro, p. 104.
130 Mariani (2018), pp. 47-48.
131 Porro, p. 105.

associated with a precise biographical experience. It can be said that this work is characterised by a "double memory", which is related both to life episodes and reading moments.[132]

As already noted, in all the works by Levi, there are some references to his life: he uses different genres and tones to express his personal experiences. Therefore, his main inspiration seems to be his everyday life, not only the trauma of the Holocaust, but also his work as a chemist and a writer. Nonetheless, he wrote a fictional novel, published in April 1982, in which he invented an entire story for the first time. The plot, whose main characters are part of a group of Jewish partisans, is set at the time of Nazi-Fascism, precisely between July 1943 and August 1945. After a brief summary of the novel's plot, it is clear that *Se non ora, quando?* is undoubtedly related to Levi's personal life, but it is important to stress that it does not refer to Levi's direct experience: he did not write this book to describe something he had personally experienced, but rather for the pleasure of literary invention.[133]

Writing appears to be a duty for Levi with reference to his role as a witness, but it also represents a pleasure and a sort of psychological impulse, as he claims in the preface of *Ad ora incerta*, particularly referring to poetry:

> In tutte le civiltà, anche in quelle ancora senza scrittura, molti, illustri e oscuri, provano il bisogno di esprimersi in versi, e vi soggiacciono: secernono quindi materia poetica, indirizzata a se stessi, al loro prossimo o all'universo, robusta o esangue, eterna o effimera.[134]

Ad ora incerta is a collection of poems published in 1984 and including twenty-seven poems previously contained in *L'osteria di Brema*, thirty-four poems previously published by the newspaper *La Stampa* and the translations of some poems by Heinrich Heine and Joseph Rudyard Kipling. The title refers to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the most relevant poem of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Levi chose a passage of this poem to express the pain and the shame of survivors, who "at an uncertain hour" dream about the dead inmates of the concentration camps and fear that nobody can trust their story.[135]

A year after the publication of *Ad ora incerta*, Levi published a collection of essays called *L'altrui mestiere*: these essays had appeared in the newspaper *La Stampa* between

132 Mariani (2018), pp. 54-56.
133 Porro, pp. 135-136.
134 Levi (2017), p. 7.
135 Porro, p. 145.

1976 and 1985 and they basically deal with the possible associations between science and literature. This theme is particularly important for Levi because, as both a chemist and a writer, he aims at stressing the possibility of a positive "entanglement" between natural and human sciences.[136] This work can represent another example which helps understand how Levi should not be considered solely as a survivor and a witness, but rather as a real writer, who is able to write short stories, poems, novels and even essays covering a wide range of topics.

Levi's last work, *I sommersi e i salvati*, is dated April 1986 and the title is taken from the central chapter of *Se questo è un uomo*: it may seem that, after having explored different genres and themes, Levi decided to look back at the dramatic experience which represents his starting point in literature. A year before his suicide in the house where he had always lived, he published this book summarising all his considerations about the experience of the lager. He concludes that a totally objective testimony is almost impossible first of all because of the personal involvement of survivors; and secondly because only the inmates who died in the concentration camps truly lived through the total experience of the lager, but they lost their voice and cannot tell their real story.[137]

At this point, it could be interesting to better analyse the work that "transformed" a chemist into a writer: *Se questo è un uomo*. The question from which I would like to start is the following: why did Levi decide to write about Auschwitz? This fundamental question needs a multiple answer. This is why, in the afterword of the book, Cesare Segre claims that, reading the preface by Levi, it is possible to identify four different aims of *Se questo è un uomo*: firstly, reporting an extremely traumatic experience; secondly, condemning all kinds of racist and xenophobic ideas which could lead to dramatic consequences; moreover, this book gives Levi the possibility to reflect on human behaviour in extreme conditions; finally, Levi admits that this work is the outcome of an "inner liberation" related to the necessity of telling his own experience.[138] Levi felt this urgent need, when he was still in the concentration camp of Auschwitz: in the appendix added to the 1976 edition of *Se questo è un uomo*, he states that he started writing the book in the lab of the lager, in the few moments in which he was able to

136 Porro, p. 122.
137 Porro, pp. 154-155.
138 Levi (2014), p. 198.

reflect and remember his past, reminding himself he was still a human being despite of the terrible life conditions of the lager.[139] In the book, there is a passage that confirms what Levi claims in the appendix:

> Ma non appena, al mattino, io mi sottraggo alla rabbia del vento e varco la soglia del laboratorio, ecco al mio fianco la compagna di tutti i momenti di tregua, del Ka-Be e delle domeniche di riposo: la pena del ricordarsi, il vecchio feroce struggimento di sentirsi uomo, che mi assalta come un cane all'istante in cui la coscienza esce dal buio. Allora prendo la matita e il quaderno, e scrivo quello che non saprei dire a nessuno.[140]

This quotation ends with a clear reference to the difficulty of telling the painful experience of the lager; however, when in October 1945 Levi returned to Turin, he immediately began to tell his story and write it down at work or on commuter trains. This story became a book in 1946, when Levi sent it to three publishers, including Einaudi. They all refused to publish Levi's work, whose several chapters were finally published in early 1947 by a local Communist Party journal, *L'amico del popolo*. The complete work was accepted in October 1947 by a small publishing house, De Silva, run by Franco Antonicelli, former president of the Piedmont Committee of National Liberation. Some literary critics and writers, such as Arrigo Cajumi and Italo Calvino, judged positively the book, but it was forgotten until 1958, when it was republished by Einaudi.[141] One of the possible reason why Levi's work was initially refused by Einaudi could be the great amount of books dealing with war, Resistance and deportees' stories published during the immediate postwar years. It can be said that it was a period characterised by the "obsession of telling": this is exactly the expression Calvino used in the preface of the 1964 edition of his first novel, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, to refer to the emergence of a "chorus" of stories telling painful experiences related to World War II.[142] In that context, it was difficult for Levi to find a space in the publishing world, which seemed to be more interested in Resistance novels, sold by the thousands, than Holocaust testimonies. After 1947, there was indeed a sudden decrease in the awareness of the concentration camps: people preferred to forget the immediate traumatic past.[143]

139 Levi (2014), p. 173.
140 Levi (2014), p. 139.
141 R. Gordon (1999), "Primo Levi, Witness", *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought*, p. 1.
142 A. Baldini (2014), "Primo Levi and the Italian Memory of the Shoah", *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC*, p. 161.
143 Gordon, p. 2.

The main difference between the two editions of *Se questo è un uomo* is the addition of an entire chapter called *Iniziazione*, where Levi describes his encounter with sergeant Steinlauf. Levi does not understand why Steinlauf continues to take care of his personal hygiene despite of the lack of soap and the horrible conditions in which they live. However, the sergeant teaches Levi an important lesson:

> […] che appunto perché il Lager è una gran macchina per ridurci a bestie, noi bestie non dobbiamo diventare; che anche in questo luogo si può sopravvivere, e perciò si deve voler sopravvivere, per raccontare, per portare testimonianza; e che per vivere è importante sforzarci di salvare almeno lo scheletro, l'impalcatura, la forma della civiltà.[144]

This is the first time in the book that a direct connection between survival and testimony is made and it is possible that Levi decided to add this relevant consideration in response to the troubling forgetfulness in relation to the Holocaust emerging in the post-war years. In those years, Levi became more and more aware of the importance of his role as a witness and started using literature as a means of communication and knowledge.[145] Furthermore, in the second edition of the book Levi also added a brief description of his experience as a partisan, his arrest and his detention in the camp of Carpi-Fòssoli at the very beginning of the work. According to Martina Mengoni, this sort of introduction underlining the personal characteristics of Levi before the experience of the lager can be considered as a presentation of the author-protagonist: in the first edition, Levi only focused on the seriousness of the facts; by contrast, in the 1958 edition, he felt the need to introduce himself as an "agens" and an "auctor". Reading this presentation, readers get the impression of a 24-year-old learned man, who likes loneliness, reflection and imagination. This description appears to be charaterised by a series of psychological and moral attributes, such as "poco senno" and "nessuna esperienza", which convey modesty and sobriety.[146]

This same sobriety characterises the type of language and tone Levi chose for his fragemented testimony. In the above-mentioned appendix to *Se questo è un uomo*, Levi indeed underlines how hatred and violence do not represent the right answer to Fascism and, for this reason, he avoids the complaining attitude of the victim and the angry tone of the avenger in his work. Levi believes that the rational and sober tone of the witness

144 Levi (2014), p. 33.
145 Baldini (2014), p. 164.
146 M. Mengoni (2018), "Primo Levi, autoritratti periodici", *Allegoria*, p. 145.

can make his testimony more objective and reliable.[147]As a result, Levi's language and style well express the pain of his traumatic experience, but they are not desperate, passionate, "picturesque"or revengeful. Levi totally refuses "pathos" to stress the trauma caused by the experience of the lager. This is why his writing process is mainly based on the selection of memories: Levi intentionally omits the most virulent, violent and disgusting details, such as the terrible smell of the cabins and the horror of sick bodies and corpses.[148] Levi's main aim is not horrifying his readership, he rather aims at objectivity and clarity: therefore, he keeps distance from his own personal experience. This impersonal, sober and silent style is well described by Catherine Charlwood:

> Not everything should be said and shared, even according to Levi, the writer who saw communication as a moral imperative. His impersonal constructions make taciturnity seem like a principle of politeness, a rule one lives by. Privacy of mind is a human right; some things are necessarily unknown to others […].[149]

In the preface of the book, Levi claims that he does not intend to focus on the atrocities of the lager; on the contrary, he aims at analysing human behaviour in extreme conditions, creating what he calls "uno studio pacato di alcuni aspetti dell'animo umano".[150] In this very particular description of *Se questo è un uomo*, it is possible to trace the origin of this title: its hypothetical structure leads to a discussion about what it means to be human, the relationship between mere existence and worthy life and the dignity of the individual.[151]

In this study, *Se questo è un uomo* has been previously defined as a fragmented testimony. Its non-linear structure is indeed underlined by Levi hmself in the preface:

> Mi rendo conto e chiedo venia dei difetti strutturali del libro. […] Di qui il suo carattere frammentario: i capitoli sono stati scritti non in successione logica, ma per ordine di urgenza. Il lavoro di raccordo e di fusione è stato svolto su piano, ed è posteriore.[152]

As a consequence, the structure of the book does not follow the typical phases of a narration, namely the beginning, the main body and the end: the seventeen chapters composing the work are not displayed in chronological order; by contrast, their order is based on their relevance in the survivor's memory. This apparently confused order and

147 Levi (2014), p. 174.
148 F. Rastier (2009), *Ulisse ad Auschwitz: Primo Levi, il superstite*, Napoli: Liguori, p. 81.
149 Voulehainen & Chapman, p. 196.
150 Levi (2014), p. 3.
151 Mariani (2018), pp. 19-20.
152 Levi (2014), pp. 3-4.

fragmentation seem to represent the key to interpret and convey the inexplicable world of the lager.[153] In addition to these chapters dealing with the most meaningful memories of Levi, *Se questo è un uomo* is characterised by a paratext composed of a poem by Levi, a short preface underlining the main features and aims of the work and an appendix added in 1976. The poem was published under the title *Shemà* in L*'osteria di Brema* and in *Ad ora incerta* and it is dated 10 January 1946; therefore, it was probably written in the same period of *Se questo è un uomo*. "Shemà" is the name of the most important prayer of Jewish religion and it may seem that Levi uses this term in order to replace the call to faith in God with the duty of memory: the warning tone, the initial second person plural pronoun "voi" and the imperative verbs "considerate", "meditate", "scolpitele" and "ripetetele" are all hints stressing the importance of remembering the Holocaust.[154]

The duty of memory was indeed crucial for Levi, who organised several meetings with students to tell his personal experience and that of millions of victims. Therefore, the main aim at the basis of Levi's work is exactly the same of the meetings in schools: reminding people of the urecoverable trauma caused by Nazi-Fascism in order to avoid racial discrimination, totalitarism and religious fanaticism in the future.

2.3 The therapeutic effect of storytelling

The previously presented works, namely *The Lamplighter* and *Se questo è un uomo*, are different from several points of view, but the main aspect distinguishing them is arguably the definition of the first as a "palimpsest" or "second-degree narrative" in opposition to the second which is a "testimony". A "testimony" relates to first-hand experiences; by contrast a "second-degree narrative" can be described in the words of the French literary critic Gérard Genette, who claims that a "text in the second degree" is "a text derived from another preexistent text". Genette includes this definition in the broader notion of "hypertextuality", meaning the relationship between a text, which is defined "hypertext", to an earlier text called "hypotext".[155] Therefore, the sources of

153 S. Kakish (2011), "La necessité de la non-conformité narrative et générique pour representer l'indicible dans *Si c'est un homme* de Primo Levi", *Estudios Románicos*, p. 118.

154 Levi (2014), pp. 198-199.

155 G. Genette (1997), *Palimpsests. Literature in the Second Degree*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, p. 5.

"palipsests" are not primary and direct experiences, but rather other texts.

In *Se questo è un uomo*, Levi tells the experience he personally and directly lived through, selecting the major events stored in his own memory; on the contrary, *The Lamplighter* can be described using the above-mentioned concepts of "post-memory" and "prosthetic memory", in the sense that Kay does not report her personal experience, but, on the basis of historiographic sources, she was able to reconstruct and "re-tell" the stories of four slave women. Levi's work is a fragmented testimony written by a survivor who felt the necessity to share the historical facts he witnessed; by contrast, Kay's radio-play represents a fictionalised reconstruction of traumatic events which did not happen to the author.

However, the two works, both dealing with massive historical traumas, seem to give storytelling a great importance as far as the process of recognition and assimilation of the trauma is concerned. Here I use the term storytelling in the sense of reporting a particular experience in oral or written form in the attempt of exorcising the painful memories related to it; therefore, I am not referring to the ability of inventing stories. Though the "rational negotiation" of the traumas of the Holocaust and slavery appears to be extremely difficult, these works show that the sharing of traumatic stories can still represent a possible way to find a common language which is able to put into words these apparently unspeakable events.[156] For this reason, it could be said that in both works, storytelling is seen as an "empowering and effective therapeutic method" for trauma victims.[157] Transmitting their own stories of oppression, discrimination and deprivation gives the victims the possibility to "order their life retrospectively", accept their traumatic past and make sense of it. This kind of relief is well described by Geoffrey Hartman, who, particularly referring to Holocaust survivors, states that:

> To remember forward – to transmit a personal story to children and grandchildren and all who should hear it – affirms a desegregation and the survivors' reentry into the human family. The story that links us to their past also links them to our future.[158]

This is not only true for Holocaust survivors, but it can also apply to the victims of other traumatic events, such as slavery. The imperative to tell and to be heard indeed characterises Levi as a survivor of the Holocaust and the slave women at the centre of

156 Eckstein, p. 162.
157 Andermahr, p. 13.
158 Hartman (2002), p. 122.

Kay's dramatised poem. One of them, Constance, repeats the expression "not heard" in scene six, referring to the indifference and the invisibility in which slaves were forced to live. They were deprived of their voice to tell the every-day atrocities they experienced and nobody seemed to be willing to listen to their dramatic stories. At the time, they were ignored by their masters and by society, more in general; nonetheless, as Kay underlines in her article *Missing Faces*, the history of slavery still continues to play a secondary role in world history. Thanks to the repetition of the expression "not heard", Kay appears to stress both the fear and the awareness of Constance, who needs to reacquire her own voice but, at the same time, is afraid that her words would not be heard and trusted:

> Visible. Invisible. See. Be not seen. Hear be not heard.
> To be seen and not heard.
> To be or not to be, that is the Question.[159]

The final reference to the famous Shakespearean play *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* can be interpreted as a provocative statement drawing a clear distinction between the dominant British literary canon and slave and neo-slave narratives, which have struggled to be heard and to include slavery in the great narration of world history. The secondary role given to slavery in world history is also stressed in another passage of *The Lamplighter*:

> LAMPLIGHTER:
> The men with the red sun faces came.
> Nobody told my story before.
> This is Me talking.
>
> MARY:
> This is Herself.
>
> CONSTANCE:
> This is Herself Talking.[160]

These words are repeated several times in scene four, which is indeed called "Herself Talking". This title refers to the reappropriation of her own voice on the part of the protagonist, known as the Lamplighter. By contrast, the line "Nobody told my story before" can be linked to the deprivation of the possibility to tell and be heard due to the condition of slavery and to the absence of the history of slavery in the dominant

159 Kay (2008), p. 32.
160 Kay (2008), p. 18.

historical narration. Despite of all these deprivations, the slave women at the centre of this work seem to be able to reaffirm their identity thanks to storytelling and this passage from passivity to action is strongly underlined by the capital letters of "Me", "Herself" and "Talking". In addition, this sort of dialogue between the Lamplighter, Mary and Constance stresses once again the importance of both telling and being heard: the Lamplighter is indeed not talking to herself, she rather shares her story with the other slave women, who interact with her by repeating some crucial lines. Therefore, for the Lamplighter and the other slave women the transformation of traumatic memories into narrative and the sharing of them seem to have a therapeutic effect, allowing them to accept their past traumatic experience as an important component of their identity. This process can be defined as "productive self-formation by self-formulation": the same expression is used by Petra Tournay-Theodotou to describe Kay's autobiography, *Red Dust Road*. It can be said that Kay is able to understand the slave women's need to tell their stories because, in a different way, she uses literature to overcome the painful experiences related to her adoption and her mixed-race background. Tournay-Theodotou, referring to *Red Dust Road*, indeed states that

> This narrative re-enactment can ultimately be described as a form of "scriptotherapy" which, according to Suzette Henke, denotes the "process of writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic re-enactment".[161]

As a result, although the traumatic experiences of the slave women cannot be compared to those of Kay, the "therapeutic re-enactment" of painful memories through storytelling appears to be quite effective in both cases.

As already noted, for trauma victims the necessity of telling the terrible events they experienced is often associated with the fear of listeners' indifference and mistrust. This is also true for Levi, who, in *Se questo è un uomo*, remembers a recurring nightmare he used to have when he was in the lager: in the dream, he is finally at home with his sister, some friends and other unknown people and is telling the major events which occurred to him in the camp, but suddenly realises that the people around him are not listening to him and are talking about something else without paying attention to his account. Here follows the passage I am referring to:

161 P. Tournay-Theodotou (2014 b), "Some Connection with the Place: Jackie Kay's *Red Dust Road*", *Wasafiri*, p. 16.

> È un godimento intenso, fisico, inesprimibile, essere nella mia casa, fra persone amiche, e avere tante cose da raccontare: ma non posso non accorgermi che i miei ascoltatori non mi seguono. Anzi, essi sono del tutto indifferenti: parlano confusamente fra di loro, come se io non ci fossi. Mia sorella mi guarda, si alza e se ne va senza far parola.[162]

This nightamare is a clear example of both the pleasure provided by storytelling, underlined by the three adjectives "intenso", "fisico" and "inesprimibile", and the fear of being ignored, which in *The Lamplighter* is conveyed through the expression "not heard" and here through the adjective "indifferenti". The need to tell the trauma seems to be a recurring feature of victims' dreams, as Levi stresses in one of his poems called *Alzarsi*:

> Sognavamo nelle notti feroci
> Sogni densi e violenti
> Sognati con anima e corpo:
> Tornare; mangiare; raccontare.
> [...][163]

Storytelling is here compared to other important needs, namely the need to freely return home and the basic need to eat. This sort of comparison can well explain the importance of testimony for Levi. It is possible to find a similar association between the necessity of telling traumatic experiences and basic needs in the preface to *Se questo è un uomo*, where Levi writes:

> Il bisogno di raccontare agli "altri", di fare gli "altri" partecipi, aveva assunto fra noi, prima della liberazione e dopo, il carattere di un impulso immediato e violento, tanto da rivaleggiare con gli altri bisogni elementari: il libro è stato scritto per soddisfare a questo bisogno; in primo luogo quindi a scopo di liberazione interiore.[164]

Consequently, Levi's testimony is the outcome of the impulse of freeing himself from traumatic memories thanks to the sharing of his personal story. Therefore, storytelling is defined as both an impulse and a need: the essay *Primo Levi and Hunger* indeed focuses on the connection between the basic need of hunger and Levi's desire to tell his story. The terrible hunger he suffered in the lager was due to the lack of food; on the contrary, the need to tell his experience represents another kind of "hunger", which is "psychological, emotional, and intellectual". The association between these two different kinds of needs can provide him the "energy" necessary to understand his traumatic past and the world after Auschwitz. This connection is explained in the above-

162 Levi (2014), p. 54.
163 Levi (2017), p. 18.
164 Levi (2014), pp. 3-4.

mentioned essay as follows:

> When an individual is deprived of food he is compelled to seek anything which might satisfy his need for energy. In the case of Levi the energy came from his undeniable need to write his memories which was his own hunger for life. His appetite for life was inspired and sustained by his writing about his own hunger. In doing so, Levi was able to acquire the necessary understanding of it and find strength to survive after Auschwitz.[165]

It is clear from this passage that the possibility to tell the trauma of Auschwitz represents a sort of "therapy", which enables Levi to better understand his past and survive. In the appendix of *Se questo è un uomo*, among the different aspects which allow him to survive Auschwitz, he indeed states the precise aim of telling his story:

> Forse mi ha aiutato […] la volontà non soltanto di sopravvivere (che era comune a molti), ma di sopravvivere allo scopo di raccontare le cose a cui avevamo assistito e che avevamo sopportate.[166]

The therapeutic and saving aspect of storytelling is also underlined in another work by Levi, that is *Il sistema periodico*: in the short story called *Cromo*, Levi claims that for a survivor telling and writing his story is a relief and an interior liberation. These two definitions can be summerised by an expression used by Levi, namely "sollievo liberatorio". In this short story, the writing process is described as a means to exorcise traumatic memories and accept them.[167]

It may seem that storytelling and the transmission of memories play a central role in both Levi's and Kay's literature: the four main characters of *The Lamplighter* use storytelling to create a sort of community, which is able to overcome the trauma of the past; and, as already noted, Kay, similarly to Levi, writes in the attempt to accept her past and reconcile with her identity. In an interview, Kay indeed stresses the therapeutic effect of storytelling, which can also become a source of survival:

> I always think that telling stories and survival are intimately connected, and that the imagination has a great power to heal as well as to enthral. […][168]

According to Kay, telling stories has the "power to heal" and *The Lamplighter* shows where this power comes from: the four slave women are able to create a community where they feel understood and protected thanks to the sharing of their stories, which are different, but the same time, have a lot in common. One of the main advantages deriving from storytelling is therefore the sense of community. At the beginning of

165 D. Bisello-Antonucci (2011), "Primo Levi and Hunger", *Quaderni d'italianistica*, p. 195.
166 Levi (2014), p. 191.
167 F. Pianzola (2017 a), *Le trappole morali di Primo Levi*, Milano: Ledizioni-LediPublishing, p. 28.
168 Gee, p. 19.

scene four in *The Lamplighter*, there is a sort of stage direction which highlights the connection between the different experiences of the slave women:

> The same chorus of three women will accompany the telling of the Lamplighter's story, to give the impression that any single story is a multiple one.[169]

"Any single story is a multiple one" because the women share the same trauma, that is slavery, and they form a "chorus" in order to share their pain, trying to overcome it. In the same scene, a line pronounced by Constance is particularly relevant in this context:

> I am. She is. You are. They. They is. They are, they are, they are.[170]

This confusion of pronouns and verbs may convey the entanglement between the personal stories of the characters, who are all victims of slavery in its different terrible facets.

A similar "chorus" is formed by the "multiple stories" of the inmates of the lager: in the chapter called *Il lavoro*, Levi tells the story of Resnyk, a Polish inmate who shares the bed with him. Levi compares his story to the hundred of thousands of stories told by Holocaust victims. Levi defines all these stories as painful, cruel and moving and, according to him, they are related one to each other by the dramatic neccessity of being told and heard:

> Mi ha raccontato la sua storia, e oggi l'ho dimenticata, ma era certo una storia dolorosa, crudele e commovente; ché tali sono tutte le nostre storie, centinaia di migliaia di storie, tutte diverse e tutte piene di una tragica sorpredente necessità.[171]

In the part called *Storia di dieci giorni*, which tells the events occurring between the flight of the Nazis from the lager and the arrival of the Russian forces, it is possible to find another passage underlining the inmates' necessity of telling each other their experiences. In those days, Levi is waiting for the arrival of the liberators of the camp with two other men, Charles and Arthur, and the only thing which gives them the strength to survive is once again storytelling:

> A sera, intorno alla stufa, ancora una volta Charles, Arthur ed io ci sentimmo ridiventare uomini. Potevamo parlare di tutto. Mi appassionava il discorso di Arthur sul modo come si passavano le domeniche a Provenchères nei Vosgi, e Charles piangeva quasi quando io gli raccontai dell'armistizio in Italia, dell'inizio torbido e disperato della resistenza partigiana, dell'uomo che ci aveva traditi e della nostra cattura sulle montagne.[172]

169 Kay (2008), p. 15.
170 Kay (2008), p. 15.
171 Levi (2014), p. 60.
172 Levi (2014), p. 169.

Therefore, the relationship Levi is able to build with these men helps him survive and the sharing of their memories becomes a way to rediscover themselves as human beings who are capable of empathy. The possibility to communicate is indeed extremely important, but in this passage, the sensorial experience related to the heat of the stove is also relevant: after a long time of pain, their bodies are finally able to feel pleasant sensations thanks to the physical heat of the stove and the "emotional heat" of friends.[173] These examples taken from *The Lamplighter* and *Se questo è un uomo* show how the victims of trauma share their stories in order to feel a sense of community and bear the burden of traumatic memories together. In this sense, the act of telling personal experiences has to be accompanied by the act of listening to another's story in order to really profit from that "power to heal" Kay refers to in the previously mentioned interview. This idea stressing the importance of sharing different stories that can become a "multiple one" is also supported by Cathy Caruth, one of the first theorist of Trauma Studies:

> […] the story of the way in which one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility of listening to another's wound.[174]

This quotation exactly explains the kind of community the inmates of Auschwitz and the slave women of Kay's work have built. These victims of different traumas find relief thanks to the possibility to listen to other traumatic stories, which can link them in a single larger community.

This "inherently curative process", however, is not easy for the victims of trauma. For this reason, both Levi and Kay depict the difficulty of telling the trauma through speechlessness and absence of communication. Focusing on *The Lamplighter*, the main example in this context is the protagonist's gradual passage from speechlessness, represented by the traumatised child Aniwaa, to "self-articulation" and "self-assertion", which result from the textual testimony of the Lamplighter.[175] In the first scene, a young girl, Aniwaa, is captured in her village, taken away from her family and brought to Cape Coast Castle, a dungeon where slaves were kept before leaving for the Americas. When

173 F. Pianzola (2017 b), "Il postumanesimo di Primo Levi: storie sulla co-evoluzione di natura e tecnica", *Primo Levi*, p. 516.
174 Caruth (1996), p. 8.
175 Tournay-Theodotou (2014 a), p. 177.

she arrives in the dungeon, the pathological response to the trauma is speechlessness:

> My mouth goes dry and my lips. My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. After that, I stop talking. The words dry under my lips.[176]

One of the main consequences of trauma seems to be the impossibility of talking: in a prison, deprived of her family and without knowing what is going to happen, Aniwaa cannot share her thoughts and fears with anybody; therefore, communication appears to be useless in those terrible conditions. Nevertheless, the entire work portrays the gradual transition of Aniwaa from speechlessness to narration and recovery: by reacquiring her own words through the re-articulation of her experience, she is able to overcome the trauma of capture and enslavement. This transition is well represented by the opposition between the first scene concluding with Aniwaa's loss of speech and the last scene, in which Aniwaa and the Lamplighter are finally able to reconcile in a single identity. In this same scene, the Lamplighter emphasises the "power of self-fashioning through narration"[177]:

> This is the story of the Lamplighter:
> One day, I finally managed to tell
> My story. I wrote it down.
> It was printed and reprinted
> And told.
> And retold again.[178]

The verbs "reprinted" and "retold" are a clear reference to the fact that *The Lamplighter* is not a testimony, it is rather based on the recontruction and the "re-telling" of true stories found in historical archives. Choosing these verbs, Kay seems to define her work as the interpretation of the slave experience from a contemporary point of view.[179] Moreover, this passage underlines once again the possibility of recovery through storytelling, as Tournay-Theodotou well explains in the following words:

> Kay's emphasis on storytelling is critical for her reconstructive project as it points to the possibility of recovery from a past of trauma and pain if one can arrive at a narrative articulation that enables reflection and renegotiation.[180]

The absence of communication is a mark of trauma also in *Se questo è un uomo*. The concentration camp of Auschwitz is indeed described as a place characterised by

176 Kay (2008), pp. 9-10.
177 Tournay-Theodotou (2014 a), p. 178.
178 Kay (2008), p. 92.
179 Tournay-Theodotou (2014 a), p. 177.
180 Tournay-Theodotou (2014 a), p. 178.

silence. When the victims first arrive in the camp, they are tremendously shocked and stop talking:

> Tutto era silenzioso come in un acquario, e come in certe scene di sogni.[181]

They are not able to express their feelings through words because they find themselves in a place which seems to be unintelligible: given that understanding needs communication and they are not capable of giving sense to their trauma, they become speechless.[182] In addition, the first words they hear are those of the Nazi guards, who speak a bad Italian: therefore, the incomprehensibility due to the foolishness of the place is associated with a more "practical" and linguistic incomprehensibility. This linguistic incomprehensibility is explained by means of the biblical metaphor of the "perpetual Babel".[183] The inmates of Auschwitz speak indeed several different languages and the reference to Babel aims at representing the confusion of languages and the consequent impossibility of clear communication[184]:

> La confusione delle lingue è una componente fondamentale del modo di vivere di quaggiù; si è circondati da una perpetua Babele, in cui tutti urlano ordini e minacce in lingue mai prima udite, e guai a chi non afferra a volo.[185]

This metaphor may exemplify the difficulty of communication caused by trauma; however, Levi also underlines that one possibility to survive is resisting this deprivation of dialogue. In his collection of essay, *I sommersi e i salvati*, Levi indeed claims that an inmate is very lucky if he/she meets someone who speaks the same language because he/she can communicate, exchange ideas and advice and share memories. On the contrary, isolation and speechlessness, represented in *I sommersi e i salvati* by the sentence "la lingua ti si secca in pochi giorni, e con la lingua il pensiero", lead to hopelessness and dehumanisation.[186] It is important to notice that Levi and Kay use almost the same image to depict the absence of speech caused by trauma, namely dry mouth: Aniwaa describes her loss of speech by saying "my mouth goes dry and my lips", as previously mentioned; similarly, Levi conveys the traumatic lack of communication through the sentence "la lingua ti si secca in pochi giorni".

181 Levi (2014), p. 12.
182 Voulehainen & Chapman, p. 190.
183 P. Frare (2010), *Il potere della parola: Dante, Manzoni, Primo Levi*, Novara: Interlinea, p. 8.
184 Kakish, p. 123.
185 Levi (2014), p. 30.
186 Frare, p. 10.

To conclude, storytelling is considered in both works as an interior liberation, a personal need and also a duty, that of transmitting a traumatic history which future generations should not forget. In both cases, the means by which traumatic stories are transmitted is not the emphasis on horrific atrocities, as it is stressed in the preface to *Se questo è un uomo* and in the fourth scene of *The Lamplighter*. As already noted, in the preface, Levi defines his work "studio pacato" and adds:

> Perciò questo mio libro, in fatto di particolari atroci, non aggiunge nulla a quanto è ormai noto ai lettori di tutto il mondo […].[187]

Similarly, in *The Lamplighter*, the protagonist explains that her main aim is not that of horrifying:

> I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself. On the contrary, my description falls far short of the facts. It is not my intention to horrify.[188]

Therefore, these works appear to emphasise the important role of language, communication and sharing of memories in the recovery from trauma, without the need for sensationalism and horrific details. The strong link between storytelling and survival is made clear by both authors: Levi and Kay indeed show how, thanks to storytelling, the victims of trauma are able to feel connected and fight against painful memories.

2.4 Literature as a means to re-write history

The relationship between literature and history is very controversial: literature is usually associated with the world of imagination and fiction; by contrast, history seems to deal with undoubtedly true facts, which are always taken for granted. However, this clear-cut distinction can easily be challenged by the concept of "metahistory", introduced by the American historian and philosopher Hayden White. White indeed claims that history can be considered as a form of rhetoric and narration: in this sense, literature and history do not appear so different. Focusing on the ideas of Michel Foucault and Friedrich Nietzsche, White shows that historical knowledge is biased because the events included in the great naration of history are those which prove to be more rhetorically effective in the context of the discourse of power. Therefore, literature may function as plural discourse and historical reconstruction and can give voice to marginalised

187 Levi (2014), p. 3.
188 Kay (2008), p. 15.

communities, which are usally excluded from the predominant historical accounts.[189] The risk linked to this interpretation is the impossibility to have access to our own historical experience. This risk is even higher when confronting with historical traumas: the generations who did not directly experience a trauma can only rely on the testimony of witnesses; however, as Cathy Caruth also stresses, the victims of trauma are not able to fully assimilate the event as it occurs and, as a result, the memory of the trauma is not a "possessed knowledge", it rather "possesses" the victims. Therefore, Caruth seems to underline the "inaccessibility of trauma", which, for this reason, is also defined as a "symptom of history".[190] Nevertheless, Caruth also claims that a traumatic experience can be transmitted through

> […] a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding.[191]

The language of literature appears to be more effective than history in the representation of trauma because it is not linear and straightforward and, therefore, not being referential, is able to convey the most irrational and emotional aspects related to trauma.[192] Trauma should not only be seen as unutterable and unconscious because memory, testimony, and even literature, can provide a means to "re-tell" experiences that may otherwise be excluded from the historical archive. The important role of memory and literature in the restoration of historical trauma is also underlined by Marianne Hirsch, who states that:

> As a form of counter-history, "memory" offered a means to account for the power structures animating forgetting, oblivion, and erasure and thus to engage in acts of repair and redress.[193]

The term "counter-history" perfectly applies to Kay's *The Lamplighter* because this work aims at offering an historical recontruction focusing on the voices of black slaves, which have been erased from the official historical accounts. This consideration can be linked to a larger cultural movement including the whole black diaspora and its attempt to put the history of slavery at the core of modern history and Western capitalism. In this way, black slaves can be considered as having a primary role in world history and

189 E. Zinato (2015), *Letteratura come storiografia? Mappe e figure della mutazione italiana*, Macerata: Quodlibet Studio, pp. 15-16.
190 Caruth (1995), pp. 5-6.
191 Caruth (1996), p. 5.
192 Branchini, p. 397.
193 Hirsch, p. 16.

economy. In this context, the history of slavery is thus restored and, as Paul Gilroy also claims, is part of a "counter-culture" which challenges Western discourse of power.[194] In an article anticipating the publication of *The Lamplighter*, Kay shows that her work is part of this "counter-culture" and aims at strengthening the public memory related to slavery:

> The history of the slave trade is not "black history" to be shoved into a ghetto and forgotten, or to be brought out every 100 years for a brief airing, then put back in the cupboard. It is the history of the world.[195]

Therefore, although *The Lamplighter* is a literary work not dealing with a first-hand experience, it can still represent a way to include the history of slavery in world history thanks to "rememory".

Scene thirteen called *British Cities* is probably the best example in order to demonstrate Kay's attept to re-write history by presenting the imperial past of Britain as "integral to British mainstream history". This scene is thus characterised by several references to the economic reasons at the basis of the slave trade: the economic development of British cities indeed depended on the profit gained by the slave trade.[196] This historical fact, often omitted in the official historical accounts, is particularly emphasised by MacBean's words:

> There is not a brick in this city but what is cemented with the blood of a slave.[197]

It is important to underline that this acknowledgment of the role of black slaves in the economic progress of Britain is conveyed through MacBean's voice, which, in the entire work, represents Western colonial point of view. In this way, Kay is able to reverse British mainstream history by transmitting a different version of it paradoxically expressed by the character who embodies colonial power. To reinforce this idea and give the slave women the possibility to use their own voice, the same words are repeated by Mary and the Lamplighter a few pages later. Furthermore, Kay's "re-inscription of the history of slavery" as strongly connected to British history is also underlined by the Lamplighter in the following lines[198]:

> My story is the story of Great Britain

194 Oboe, pp. 240-241.
195 Kay (2007), p. 3.
196 Tournay-Theodotou (2014 a), pp. 178-180.
197 Kay (2008), p. 74.
198 Tournay-Theodotou (2014 a), p. 180.

The United Kingdom, The British Empire.[199]

This statement clearly denies the possibility of considering the history of slavery as exclusively "black history" and stresses once again the need for a "counter-history" questioning the discourse of power. For the same purpose, in scene thirteen, it is possible to find several references to money, which are expressed through enumeration, and even associative word-play and proverbs:

CONSTANCE:
Money makes the world go round.

BLACK HARRIOT:
Money makes the man.[200]

These lines are also particularly relevant in the context of "cross-traumatic affiliation" because the reference to the musical *Cabaret*, dealing with the persecution of the Jewish population, seems to create an association between the trauma of the Holocaust and that of slavery, which share the same "capitalist nature".[201]

The above-mentioned quotations show Kay's engagement in the creation of a "counter-history" focusing on the stories of black slaves; however, being a "belated, fictionalised account of slavery", *The Lamplighter* can be seen as an inauthentic and unreliable source, which cannot be taken into account for the trasmission of traumatic memories to the next generations. In order to avoid this interpretation denying the accessibility of trauma through literary language and "postmemory", Kay uses these words[202]:

LAMPLIGHTER:
Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction.[203]

For the same purpose, in scene six, the Lamplighter says:

What I tell is not a story.[204]

Following Caruth's idea based on the power of literary language to reinterpret trauma, it can be argued that, though documentary evidence is necessary in the process of historical narratives of slavery, it is not enough because it has to be combined with "emphatic, responsive understanding and performative, dialogical uses of language".

199 Kay (2008), p. 81.
200 Kay (2008), p. 76.
201 Tournay-Theodotou (2014 a), p. 179.
202 Nadalini, p. 58.
203 Kay (2008), p. 15.
204 Kay (2008)p. 36.

Therefore, literary language and fiction become a medium to transmit history, this is why the Lamplighter can say "what I tell is not a story". In addition, Kay's choice of the first person narration is functional to a direct and non-mediated transmission of the historical trauma of slavery; on the contrary, the objectivity of third person narrations, typical of historical accounts, does not appear suitable to write about traumatic experiences.[205]

Levi concludes the preface to *Se questo è un uomo* with the following words:

> Mi pare superfluo aggiungere che nessuno dei fatti è inventato.[206]

Surprisingly, Levi uses almost the same words of the Lamplighter to assure the readership that the events he is going to tell are not fictional. Given that *The Lamplighter* is a fictionalised reconstruction, such a warning seems necessary to remind the readers that "postmemory" can be a valuable means to transmit historical trauma; but Levi's above-mentioned statement leads to another fundamental question: why does Levi feel the need to underline the truthfulness of his testimony? First of all, as already noted, the fear of not being trusted is shared by all the victims of trauma and this statement may be a consequence of this fear. Secondly, Levi is aware of the fact that the testimonies of traumatised people are not always considered as fully reliable and the term "testimony" itself is related to the challenge of mimesis: to what extent can a survivor "imitate experienced events verbally" and is language really able to express the apparently unutterable trauma of the Holocaust?[207] These doubts concerning the "ineffability of the Holocaust" have emerged since Theodor Adorno's statement about the impossibility of writing poetry after Auschwitz.[208] Levi indeed recognises the problems connected to the representation of trauma through language:

> Allora per la prima volta ci siamo accorti che la nostra lingua manca di parole per esprimere questa offesa, la demolizione di un uomo.[209]

This passage from *Se questo è un uomo* seems to stress the lack of a proper language to convey the trauma experienced by the victims of the Holocaust. Telling the events occurred in the concentration camp seems thus to be in opposition with the existence of

205 Nadalini, p. 58.
206 Levi (2014), p. 4.
207 Eckstein, pp. 12-13.
208 Voulehainen & Chapman, p. 129.
209 Levi (2014), pp. 18-19.

Auschwitz itself because the main aim of the camp was that of killing all the inmates, so there should not have been any survivors. Therefore, the oblivion of the Holocaust was part of Nazi plans. For this reason, in *Se questo è un uomo*, Levi claims that the only real witnesses of the Holocaust would have been the "drowned", the ones who lost their lives in the camp, because they lived through the entire traumatic experience of the lager. This is why the testimonies of survivors can appear partial and weak; however, according to Levi, the role of survivors is that of giving voice to the "drowned" by telling their stories. Therefore, although the real witnesses are the "drowned" who cannot write their own testimonies, survivors' words should not be considered as partial and ineffective. It is precisely this partiality that makes surivivors' testimony particularly important because it tells the story of a meaningful absence, namely the death of millions of innocent people.[210]

Underlining the importance of survivors' testimony in the context of the transmission of traumatic memory, Levi seems to challenge Adorno's statement. Levi indeed admits that it is extremely difficult to verbally express the experience of the lager, but precisely for this reason, literary language, thanks to its complexity and ambiguity, can be the proper means to reinterpret trauma:

> The truth of the Lagers is simply too vast and complicated to be expressed clearly or simply; in fact, it requires a poet's creative imagination even to suggest its contours.[211]

Se questo è un uomo is thus not only a testimony, but uses literary style and strategies to report historical facts. The "poet's creative imagination" is here not used to invent stories, it is rather functional to the selection of memories, their disposition within the work and literary intertextuality. As already noted, *Se questo è un uomo* is a fragmented testimony, in the sense that the events are not chronologically ordered: this simple choice is a clear example of literary strategy, which does not damage the authenticity of the testimony because the events are presented in order of relevance and, in this way, they can be better memorised by the readers. This process of selection and disposition is part of the act of representation, which is described by Stuart Hall as a process connecting "meaning and language to culture". Hall's definition, depicting representation as "a far from simple or straightforward process", appears to be

210 Mariani (2018), pp. 34-37.
211 Voulehainen & Chapman, p. 156.

fundamental to understand why representation cannot be completely objective.[212] Representing trauma cannot indeed be a totally objective process because remembering is extremely painful and the interpretation of trauma needs empathy and subjectivity. In *Se questo è un uomo*, Levi chooses the events to tell, knowing that some events are too traumatic to bear their memory:

> Molte cose furono allora fra noi dette e fatte; ma di queste è bene che non resti memoria.[213]

This quotation confirms the process of selection Levi uses in order to avoid horrific details and have control over the transmission of traumatic memory: this control denies the possibility of fully objectivity, but at the same time, underlines Levi's attempt to meaningfully organise the narration of the events.

In conclusion, in both Kay's narrative of slavery and Levi's testimony, literature appears to be a valuable means to reinterpret and convey historical trauma; by contrast, history seems "too contingent, too delimited" to allow an empathic understanding of the complexity of trauma.[214]

212 S. Hall (1997), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Milton Keynes: The Open University, p. 15.
213 Levi (2014), p. 8.
214 Voulehainen & Chapman, p. 156.

Dehumanisation and resilience

3.1 The traumatic experience of dehumanisation

The historical traumas of slavery and the Holocaust are both characterised by the process of dehumanisation: black slaves and the inmates of the consentration camps could no longer be considered as human beings because they were deprived of food, freedom, their homes, families and names. Their "subhuman" condition was justified by their supposed inferiority related to their nationality, religion or political ideas. Because of racism and anti-semitism, the victims of slavery and the Holocaust lost their identity and dignity, being involved in a process of dehumanisation that includes violence, oppression, captivity and discrimination. This process is widely described in both *The Lamplighter* and *Se questo è un uomo*.

The process of dehumanisation is mainly conveyed through the comparison between the victims of trauma and animals or objects. Levi indeed testifies that hunger, cold and fatigue transform the inmates of Auschwitz into "subhumans", who can easily be compared to animals.[215] Their physical and psychological destruction cause their gradual reduction to the level of animals and, from the point of view of their persecutors, this seems to justify their extermination.[216] The most relevant example of this animality can be found in the chapter of *Se questo è un uomo* called *Una buona giornata*, where the Kapo of Levi's Kommando asks the inmates: "Wer hat noch zu fressen?". The choice of the verb "fressen" instead of "essen" is not accidental: "fressen" is indeed usually used to refer to the way in which dogs eat:

> […] realmente questo nostro mangiare in piedi, furiosamente, scottandoci la bocca e la gola, senza il tempo di respirare, è "fressen", il mangiare delle bestie, e non certo "essen", il mangiare degli uomini, seduti davanti a un tavolo, religiosamente.[217]

This verb well represents the annihilation of the inmates' dignity: hunger destroys and "empties" their bodies and, by doing so, it leads them to bestiality and animality. This hunger also represents a genaralised lack, which coincides with their existence and deprives them of their identity.[218]

215 Bisello-Antonucci, pp. 188-189.
216 F. Rastier (2009), *Ulisse ad Auschwitz: Primo Levi, il superstite*, Napoli: Liguori, p. 88.
217 Levi (2014), p. 71.
218 Mariani (2018), p. 25.

In *The Lamplighter*, the reduction to the level of animals is visible from the first scene, where Aniwaa, imprisoned in the dungeon, compares herself to an animal:

> Outside this place, where I am trapped and kept like an animal, there is a sound I never hear before.[219]

Therefore, after being deprived of her freedom and her family, she feels no longer a human being and, precisely at this point, the process of dehumanisation begins. The slave trade, removing millions of Africans from their homeland and shipping them to unknown countries, indeed created generations of "culturally unmade" people, deprived of their culture and identity. In Kay's dramatised poem, this process of "unmaking" and dehumanisation is described through a "biological metaphor" involving both a physical transformation and a comparison with two animals[220]:

> I am getting smaller by the day. I am a girl getting smaller. Maybe soon I will be the size of a goat and then the size of a yam and then the size of a cricket and then I will vanish. Maybe I will start to grow backwards. Soon I might be ten, then nine.[221]

This passage describes a process of regression and decline, underlining the brutal physical consequences of the Middle Passage and also the psychological ones, metaphorically represented by the comparison between Aniwaa and a goat and a cricket. Slavery firstly leads to dehumanisation and then to death, as stressed by the sentence "and then I will vanish". This passage is also relevant for another reason, namely the emphasis on the body: the process of dehumanisation indeed passes through physical sensations. The enslaved body is "atomised" and violated, deprived of will and desire and finally reduced into mere flesh, which can be exchanged and sold. This kind of dehumanisation may be depicted by sensory loss[222]:

> The life before, the life I lived,
> the life when I could breathe,
> when I could smell the smells
> and taste the tastes.[223]

The relationship between slavery and the five senses is made clear in the previous quotation and it is also recognised by Kay in the following words taken from the article *Missing Faces*:

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219 Kay (2008), p. 10.
220 Nadalini, p. 62.
221 Kay (2008), p. 13.
222 Nadalini, p. 62.
223 Kay (2008), p. 24.

We don't want to imagine how slavery would affect each of the five senses.[224]

It could be said that this "hightened corporeal perspective" is functional to the transmission of the traumatic experience of dehumanisation, given that *The Lamplighter* is a "postmemorial work" which cannot rely on direct testimony. The aim of "postmemory" is precisely that of reembodying "more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures" and the reference to physical sensations seems to be fundamental in this context.[225]

As already mentioned, the process of dehumanisation can also be conveyed through the comparison between the victims of trauma and objects. In the previous paragraph, the slave's body is indeed defined as mere flesh involved in commodity exchange. By contrast, the inmates of the Nazi camps were not sold and did not represent a source of income; however, similarly to the slave's body, their bodies, both living and dead, were considered as mere objects by their persecutors. In his works, Levi indeed underlines this idea, claiming that the human body was treated like a mere thing, which "one could dispose of in an arbitrary manner". In the chapter called *Esame di chimica*, Levi tells the events related to the examination in Chemistry he takes in the lager and supposes that Dr. Pannwitz, who conducts the examination, considers him as an object to exploit[226]:

Il cervello che sovrintendeva a quegli occhi azzurri e a quelle mani coltivate diceva : "Questo qualcosa davanti a me appartiene a un genere che è ovviamente opportuno sopprimere. Nel caso particolare, occorre prima accertarsi che non contenga qualche elemento utilizzabile".[227]

Therefore, the inmates of the lager, being seen as mere objects, could be exploited in some ways and then eliminated. Almost the same can be said for black slaves, whose dehumanisation is moreover characterised by their reduction to mere property. Black slaves were indeed considered as objects; for this reason, they could be sold, bought and exchanged. This particular aspect of dehumanisation is well represented by MacBean's lines in scene four of *The Lamplighter*:

Horses, to be sold at the Bull and Gate Inn Holborn.
A very good Tim Wisky with good harness.
A Chestnut Gelding, he goes safe. A good grey Mare and a well tempered Black boy who has recently had the smallpox.[228]

224 Kay (2007), p. 1.
225 Tournay-Theodotou (2014 a), p. 173.
226 Vuohelainen & Chapman, p. 70.
227 Levi (2014), p. 103.
228 Kay (2008), p. 17.

This list indifferently includes objects, animals and a slave, showing once again the dehumanisation of black slaves, who were deprived of their identity and will and sold like any other object.

The victims of slavery and the Holocaust stop to be human beings and become equal to animals or objects after a series of terrible deprivations, one of which is the loss of their names. They are deprived of their names and, in this way, they seem to lose their past and their identity. In this context, Levi describes a sort of "initiation rite" of the camp, that is the passage of the deportees from human beings to the condition of "Häftling", namely prisoner. In this "inititation", the inmates are renamed with a number tattoed on their left forearm[229]:

> *Häftling*: ho imparato che io sono uno *Häftling*. Il mio nome è 174517; siamo stati battezzati, porteremo finché vivremo il marchio tatutato sul braccio sisnistro. […] Pare che questa sia l'iniziazione vera e propria: solo "mostrando il numero" si riceve il pane e la zuppa.[230]

In this way, the inmates' past is erased and their individual identity is gradually annihilated: in this new condition, they need no longer their names and, being "subhumans", they can simply be identified by numbers, as happens with animals. Similarly, African slaves' loss of identity is related to the loss of their names: when they were bought by new masters, they were given new names. These new names appear to erase the cultural and traditional link with their homeland; as a consequence, black slaves feel deprived of their identity and memory of the past. Kay depicts this deprivation through the experiences of Constance and Black Harriot: the name "Constance" refers to the main features a slave should possess, according to white masters, namely obedience, diligence and submissiviness; the name "Black Harriot", instead, seems to be a joke because it is chosen to make a distinction between the slave woman and another white woman called Harriot. In scene six, it is indeed possible to find the following lines:

> CONSTANCE:
> I was named Constance.
> Constance so that I would behave myself
> So that I would be a virtue
> Like my sisters Faith, Patience and Charity
> So that in my abstraction

229 Porro, p. 40.
230 Levi (2014), pp. 19-20.

I would forever be constant.
[…]
To always be Constant – reliable,
Sturdy, neger wench!
[…]
BLACK HARRIOT:
I had a few names before this one.
My name is a joke.
There was a white Harriot once,
Not me.
They called me Black Harriot
So that white Harriot
Never needed to be called
White Harriot
And could just be Harriot.[231]

The passage following these lines includes the repetition of their new names on the part of Black Harriot, Constance and Mary: this repetition appears to underline the awareness of the loss of their identity, related to the replacement of their original names, which is a consequence of their entering in a new cultural and social context.

In the lager, the process of dehumanisation can also lead to a sort of "primitive state", in which immediate basic needs are the only ones that really matter. In the second chapter of *I sommersi e i salvati*, called *La zona grigia*, Levi indeed claims that, when a new prisoner arrived in the lager, he was victim of cruel jokes, which resembled the initiation ceremonies of primitive peoples. The life of the inmates, thus, can no longer be called "life" because they live in such terrible conditions that they are no longer able to think, remember the past or look to the future: they only take into account the immediate present in order to satisfy their basic needs and survive.[232] This regression into a primitive state includes animality, as already noted, and is completed by the Nazis, before fleeing from the camp:

26 gennaio. Noi giacevamo in modo di morti e di larve. L'ultima traccia di civiltà era sparita intorno a noi e dentro di noi. L'opera di bestializzazione, intrapresa dai tedeschi trionfanti, era stata portata a compimento dai tedeschi disfatti.[233]

The comparison between the sick inmates abandoned in the camp and worms seems to represent once again dehumanisation and the consequent loss of civilisation.

There is a passage from *Se questo è un uomo* which underlines the major features of the process of dehumanisation. The following features can apply to both the Holocaust and

231 Kay (2008), pp. 33-34.
232 Porro, p. 42.
233 Levi (2014), p. 169.

slavery: first of all, dehumanisation is characterised by the loss of relatives, homes, clothes, habits and all the things one can possess; secondly, suffering, violence and generalised lack may cause the loss of dignity and rational thinking; furthermore, the loss of original names and the consequent erasure of the past may lead to the loss of individual identity; finally, the reduction into a "subhuman" state, an animal, or simply an object, and the regression to a primitive condition make persecutors' decisions about the death or life of the victims much easier. Here is the passage I am referring to:

> Si immagini ora un uomo a cui, insieme con le persone amate, vengano tolti la sua casa, le sue abitudini, i suoi abiti, tutto infine, letteralmente tutto quanto possiede: sarà un uomo vuoto, ridotto a sofferenza e bisogno, dimentico di dignità e discernimento, poiché accade facilmente, a chi ha perso tutto, di perdere se stesso; tale quindi, che si potrà a cuor leggero decidere della sua vita o morte al di fuori di ogni senso di affinità umana; nel caso più fortunato, in base ad un puro giudizio di utilità.[234]

Giorgio Agamben defines the condition described by Levi as "bare life":

> Proprio perché privi di quasi tutti i diritti e le aspettative che siamo soliti attribuire all'esistenza umana e, tuttavia, biologicamente ancora vivi, essi venivano a situarsi in una zona-limite fra la vita e la morte, fra l'interno e l'esterno, in cui non erano più che nuda vita.[235]

The reduction of the prisoners of the lagers into "bare life" seems to allow the persecutors to kill them without actually committing a crime. This can only be possible in what Agamben calls a "state of exception", that is a particular condition in which, in case of wars or other critical situations, fundamental rights can be suspended. However, Agamben also points out that, during the Third Reich, the "state of exception" stopped to be a temporary condition and became the norm, rather than the exception. Moreover, the lager represents the place where the regular legal system was constantly suspended in favour of the "state of exception". It is in this particular context that the persecutors felt free to decide whether an inmate could live or die.[236] For this reason, Agamben draws the following conclusions:

> La domanda corretta rispetto agli orrori commessi nei campi non è, pertanto, quella che chiede ipocritamente come sia stato possibile commettere delitti tanto atroci rispetto a degli esseri umani; più onesto e soprattutto più utile sarebbe indagare attentamente attraverso quali procedure giuridiche e quali dispositivi politici degli esseri umani abbiano potuto essere così integralmente privati dei loro diritti e delle loro prerogative, fino a che commettere nei loro confronti qualsiasi atto non apparisse più come un delitto (a questo punto, infatti, tutto era veramente diventato possibile).[237]

In this consideration, Agamben appears to describe the camp as a system based on the

234 Levi (2014), p. 19.
235 G. Agamben (2018), *Homo sacer*, Macerata: Quodlibet, p. 144.
236 Agamben, pp. 151-152.
237 Agamben, p. 154.

"state of exception" and characterised by "bare life". In addition, this definition of "camp" can be expanded to any other system based on this structure.[238] The "state of exception" and the condition of "bare life" are indeed also at the core of the plantation system, where slaves, similarly to the lagers' prisoners, were subjected to a "triple loss":

> loss of a "home," loss of rights over his or her body, and loss of political status.[239]

As already noted, these deprivations facilitated the "work" of masters and overseers, who could have control over the death or life of their slaves. Therefore, the definition of "camp", as intended by Agamben, well applies to the plantation system. According to Achille Mbembe, in this system, the notion of biopolitics, defined as "that domain of life over which power has taken control", expands into "necropolitics", which menas "to exercise control over mortality".[240] Consequently, Mbembe describes slave life as a "form of death-in-life".[241] This is why, focusing once again on *The Lamplighter*, at the end of scene four, Black Harriot and Mary underline the strong presence of death in their life as slaves:

> BLACK HARRIOT:
> The endless deaths in us, the widowless deaths,
> The deaths in the dungeons,
> The deaths at sea
> The deaths in the ship
> The deaths in the new land
> The deaths in the plantation
> The deaths in the shacks
> The tobacco deaths, the sugar deaths.
> The broken-hearted deaths. The love-missed and missing
> Deaths. The in-your-face deaths. The stowed away deaths.
> The sea deaths. The deaths at sea.
> […]
> MARY:
> And death was in all of us.[242]

Slavery seems to be made possible by "necropolitics" because, only in these particular circumstances, power institutions can decide who is going to live and who is going to die. In this kind of oppressive system, slaves could hardly escape death.

To conclude, both the plantation system and the concentration camp system, through the process of dehumanisation, reduce the victims to the condition of "bare life", namely a

238 Agamben, pp. 156-157.
239 A. Mbembe (2003), "Necropolitics", *Public Culture*, Durham: Duke University Press, p. 21.
240 Mbembe, p. 12.
241 Mbembe, p. 21.
242 Kay (2008), p. 21.

worthless life which, in a constant "state of exception", can be eliminated with impunity.

3.2 Cultural heritage to resist dehumanisation

In the context of oppression, violence and dehumanisation created by the institution of slavery and the sytem of the concentration camps, acts of rebellion seem to be almost impossible. However, both Kay and Levi are able to demonstrate that there are some examples of agency and resistance among the victims of these terrible historical traumas. In both works, it is clear that armed revolts or escape were rarely successful and punishments were extremely severe: most of the time, the rebels indeed paid with their life. It is the case of the rebellion carried out by the Sonderkommando of Birkenau's crematorium, narrated in the chapter of *Se questo è un uomo* called *L'ultimo*, and the acts of resistance reported in the chapters of *The Lamplighter* called *Runaway* and *Resistance*. Nevertheless, I would like to focus on other means through which the victims of trauma could resist dehumanisation: a more psychological form of resilience, which is less dangerous than armed revolts, namely cultural heritage. The only way to survive in two systems, that is slavery and lagers, "designed to produce slaves" seems to be the capacity to retain a minimum level of freedom and agency.[243] Both Levi and Kay show that, in order to attain this aim, one can use his/her own cultural heritage to remind himself/herself he/she is still a human being, and not the uncivilised beast to which the persecutors try to reduce him/her.

One of the main example of cultural expression that was used by black slaves to resist dehumanisation was music: the traditional songs that slaves used to sing while working and the songs related to religious practices were indeed the few means of cultural expression which were allowed to black slaves. These slave songs have transmitted the memory of slavery and the hope of freedom across generations and, on the basis of this common memory, created a collective identity emerging from trauma.[244] In addition, Alison Landsberg also highlights the role of slave songs as a means of subtle rebellion, through which black slaves could denounce the atrocities they experienced and tell their stories of discrimination:

243 Vuohelainen & Chapman, p. 136.
244 Eyerman, pp. 13-14.

> […] slave songs built communal solidarity and served as a medium through which slaves could express the injustice of their situation and, in subtle ways, comment on the whites around them.[245]

This extremely important cultural heritage is represented by different intertexts included in *The Lamplighter*: song lyrics, quotations from religious discourse and references to the musical tradition of spriritуals. These intertexts have a double aim: firstly, they give the slave women the possibility to denounce the institution of slavery and assert a subject position against racial and patriarchal discourse; secondly, they are used to make the readership aware of the existence of a black cultural heritage helping slaves resist dehumanisation.[246] Moreover, it should be noticed that *The Lamplighter* was broadcast on the radio and performed on the stage; for this reason, it has a dramatic structure which relates the work with orality, a typical feature of black cultural expression.[247]

For instance, though the presence of music characterises the entire work, scene six appears to be the part in which the importance of orality and musical tradition is more emphasised. The slave women sing for most part of the scene and their voices superpose singing a spiritual called *Daniel*, which seems to express the suffering of being a slave taken away from homeland. For the same purpose, that is denouncing the injustices related to slavery, such as "imposed servility, hard labour and sexual exploitation", Kay uses the form of nursery rhymes and transforms popular rhymes into sinister lines, as it happens in scene six[248]:

> CONSTANCE:
> Lord, Lady, Sir, Master, Misses, Miss,
> Yes, No. Yes Miss, No Miss. Yes Sir, No Sir.
> Three bags full sir.[249]
>
> CONSTANCE:
> In the house: I learned: sewing, spinning, steaming, boiling, hot.
> Wiping, cleaning, polishing, spick and span.
> The Man can have you any time he can.
> Shimmy shammy. Hand on foot. Rub a dub.
> Three men in a tub. Shimmy shammy. Mammy.
> Mammy. Mammy. Filthy, dirty. Dirty, dirty, clean.[250]

In this case, the oral form is used to deconstruct a Western literary genre, usually related

245 Landsberg, p. 87.
246 Tournay-Theodotou (2014 a), p. 169.
247 Tournay-Theodotou (2014 a), p. 174.
248 Tournay-Theodotou (2014 a), p. 169.
249 Kay (2008), p. 27.
250 Kay (20089, p. 40.

to purity and innocence, two aspects which are completely in opposition to the harrassments of slavery.[251] Furthermore, in the same scene, Constance sings a Creole lullaby, which seems to stress the opposition between Western cultural tradition, represented here by the reference to nursery rhymes, and the oral culture of the African diaspora. This cultural heritage is thus restored and emphasised because it gives the slave women the strength to create a unified community. The main aim of slave communities was survival, which seems to be possible thanks to a shared musical tradition. The major example of this can be conveyed by Mary's words in scene six:

> I worked in the Third Gang first,
> Before the Second and then the first.
> My work was heavy -
> With the other women
> I moved my hoes quick, quick and in time,
> Singing to stop me dying in the sugar cane.
> I could hear the sugarbirds whistling
> In the sugar cane.[252]

Music represents a relief and singing appears to be the only way to bear hard labour in the fields. In order to stress this idea, this passage is followed by sugar cane music. The slave women working in the fields do not only share pain and fatigue, they also share a musical tradition and this awareness can help them escape the dehumanising process involved in slavery.

These examples show that Kay aims at recreating the "moments of oral communion" and "productive oraliture"[253] typical of diasporic cultural heritage by depicting a female-dominated world resembling the domestic zones of slave quarters and adjacent yard areas, where

> […] food preparation, child care, clothing repair and adornment, recreational storytelling and music making served as the focal point of enslaved domestic life and provided avenues for strengthening social relationships.[254]

The possibility of socialisation related to domestic life plays an extremely important role in maintaining a sense of pride and independent identity. Kay, through her emphasis on traditional songs and spirituals, intends to underline that slave communities were able to resist dehumanisation thanks to their oral tradition, as the American historian

251 Tournay-Theodotou (2014 a), p. 169.
252 Kay (2008), p. 28.
253 V.L. Popp (2012), "Improper Identification Required: Passports, Papers, and Identity Formation in Jackie Kay's *The Adoption Papers*", *Contemporary Literature*, p. 315.
254 Akinwumi & Falola, p. 234.

David Brion Davis also claims:

> […] the oral traditions preserved a sanctuary of human dignity that enabled most slaves to survive the humiliations, debasement, and self-contempt that were inseparable from human bondage.[255]

In order to further explain the importance of community ties and orality in Kay's works, it is possible to read the following passage by Valerie L. Popp summarising all the previous cosiderations:

> […] these instances of productive oraliture do not occur only in dance halls or on the streets. For her, community voice is first generated in the intimate and female-dominated spaces of the home, in the echoes between mother and daughter, in the language of lovers. Her poetry is both the sacred record that creates a traceable, recoverable history of these exchanges and the vehicle by which these private mouthings become communal, dynamic sites of identification and political activism.[256]

In *Se questo è un uomo*, Levi focuses on a form of cultural expression which is not music, as in Kay's work: cultural knowledge, and in particular literature, indeed represents a defence from the dehumanising process characterising life in the lager. In another work, namely *Lilìt e altri racconti*, Levi tells the story of Wolf, a Berlin pharmacist, who was able to find a violin in the camp and played it: this moment of relief shows how music can be a means to bear captivity, oppression and discrimination, exactly as Kay tries to convey in *The Lamplighter*. However, as already mentioned, Levi does not only refer to music: more generally, he considers culture and knowledge as forms of resilience towards the Nazis' intention to demolish the inmates of the camp as human beings. *Se questo è un uomo* is indeed characterised by "affirmations of a resolute humanism", which aim at reminding the prisoners they are still human beings. In the appendix of *Se questo è un uomo*, Levi indeed states that his survival is also related to this sort of "humanism"[257]:

> E forse ha giocato infine anche la volontà, che ho tenacemente conservata, di riconoscere sempre, anche nei giorni più scuri, nei miei compagni e in me stesso, degli uomini e non delle cose, e di sottrarmi così a quella totale umiliazione e demoralizzazione che conduceva molti al naufragio spirituale.[258]

Therefore, in his testimony, Levi intends to commemorate the prisoners who, thanks to "irrepressible humanity or sense of culture", were able to avoid their reduction into "the subhuman creatures that Nazi racial theory assumes them to be".[259]

255 Davis, p. 204.
256 Popp, pp. 315-316.
257 Vuohelainen & Chapman, p. 9.
258 Levi (2014), p. 191.
259 Vuohelainen & Chapman, p. 138.

The chapter called *Il canto di Ulisse* can be considered as the major example of the healing power of culture in the inhuman circumstances of Auschwitz. The intertextual reference of this chapter is clearly the XXVI canto of Dante's *Inferno*: this reference is particularly meaningful, given that Dante's *Divina Commedia* is considered as one of the most important works of the Italian cultural heritage. This choice thus seems to underline the possibility for literature to serve as an important means of resilience.

In this chapter, Levi remembers when, while carrying a cooking pot with Jean, a French student called Pikolo, he tries to teach him some Italian words. Surprisingly, in the terrible context of the lager, Levi choses to translate into French some parts of the XXVI canto: the reason for this choice may be the comparison, which can easily be made, between Dante's *Inferno* and the hellish camp of Auschwitz. Moreover, the character of Ulysses, pushing the boundaries of human knowledge, appears to represent the reaffirmation of human dignity thanks to a cultural, cognitive and ethical dimension.[260] Ulysses is indeed a symbol of intellectual bravery and moral integrity.[261] Levi seems to draw a comparison between Ulysses and the inmates of the camp by depicting the dangerous travel of Ulysses beyond the Pillars of Hercules. Pikolo apparently understands this comparison, as confirmed by the following words of Levi:

> […] ha ricevuto il messaggio, ha sentito che lo riguarda, che riguarda tutti gli uomini in travaglio, e noi in specie; e che riguarda noi due, che osiamo ragionare di queste cose con le stanghe della zuppa sulle spalle.[262]

The prisoners of Auschwitz indeed live in constant danger precisely like the character of Ulysses and, in this particular case, Levi and Pikolo risk their lives for the precise purpose of sharing knowledge; this is why their conversation about Dante's *Inferno* can be seen as an act of resistance and intellectual bravery and this seems to confirm the possible comparison between the two inmates and Ulysses. The importance of the pursuit of knowledge as a natural feature characterising human beings is further stressed by the following quotation from Dante:

> Considerate la vostra semenza:
> Fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
> Ma per seguir virtute e conoscenza.[263]

260 Porro, p. 54.
261 Rastier, p. 38.
262 Levi (2014), p. 111.
263 Levi (2014), p. 110.

It may seem that Dante directly refers to the inmates in order to remind them that they can retain human dignity through a moral and cultural dimension, as it is underlined by the words "virtute" and "conoscenza". This dimension helps Levi forget the hellish place where he is imprisoned and Pikolo seems to be aware of this therapeutic effect:

> Per un momento, ho dimenticato chi sono e dove sono. Pikolo mi prega di ripetere. Come è buono Pikolo, si è accorto che mi sta facendo del bene.[264]

This quotation shows that communication has a mutual therapeutic effect on both Levi and Pikolo, who fight against dehumanisation. On the one hand, Levi helps Pikolo learn Italian but it is not a simple Italian lesson because, through Dante's lines, Levi makes Pikolo better understand their condition in the lager; on the other hand, Pikolo, asking Levi to repeat some words, allows Levi to recall almost the precise lines of the XXVI canto and gives him the possibility of being proud of his cultural heritage and living a moment of relief.[265] Therefore, this conversation has some advantages for both of them because literature seems to be able to awake their traumatised and dehumanised minds, as Pierantonio Frare well explains in the following passage:

> […] l'ascolto esatto di quelle parole e la ri-pronuncia di esse per un altro hanno messo in rilievo la loro potenza e le hanno consentito di manifestarsi e di riprodursi per il bene – per la vita – di chi le ha dette e di chi le ha ascoltate.[266]

Dante's words can thus represent a source of resilience and survival; for this reason, remembering the precise lines of the XXVI canto appears to be a fundamental need, which can be compared to the need to tell the trauma, sleep and eat[267]:

> Darei la zuppa di oggi per saper saldare "non avevo alcuna" col finale. Mi sforzo di ricostruire per mezzo delle rime, chiudo gli occhi, mi mordo le dita: ma non serve, il resto è silenzio.[268]

This exchange, suggested by Levi, between the soup and Dante's words is particularly relevant because it appears to highlight the relationship between literature and survival. Hunger, also represented by the expression "mi mordo le dita", was indeed one of the main problems in the lager and skipping a meal could mean dying; therefore, this hypothetical exchange emphasises the importance of words in the fight for survival.[269]
The relationship between Levi and Pikolo, characterised by reciprocity, dialectics and

264 Levi (2014), p. 111.
265 Frare, pp. 15-16.
266 Frare, p. 14.
267 Frare, p. 11.
268 Levi (2014), p. 111.
269 Frare, p. 11.

equality, is in opposition to the typical tyranny of the lager, based on incommunicability: their dialogue is indeed the longest in the entire work, although the readers can only suppose Pikolo's answers, which are not reported on Levi's pages.[270] Thanks to the metaphor of Dante's *Inferno* and its imagery, Levi is thus able to go beyond the limits of language imposed by the oppressive world of Auschwitz.[271] Therefore, the testimony is paradoxically made possible by the fictional world of *Divina Commedia*:

> La letteratura è incastonata dentro il suo racconto fattuale, ma senza comprometterne l'attendibilità. Al contrario: è proprio la letteratura, e nello specifico la parola di Dante, che permette a questa testimonianza di essere articolata.[272]

The impossibility of the representation of the Holocaust seems to be denied by Levi's use of Dante's imagery to give shape to his most painful memories. The apparently unspekable trauma of the lager can thus be conveyed through a fundamental means of expression, namely Dante's literature, which also represents a source of survival to dehumanisation.[273]

To conclude, both Kay and Levi consider cultural heritage as a way to resist dehumanisation and overcome historical traumas: on the one hand, Kay focuses on musical traditions creating community ties which can help black slaves bear the atrocities of slavery; on the other hand, Levi choses Dante's literature as an example of cultural knowledge, which can be shared and save the inmates of the lager from their reduction to the condition of animals or mere objects.

270 Frare, p. 16.
271 Mariani (2018), p. 73.
272 Mariani (2018), p. 99.
273 Mariani (2018), pp. 98-99.

Split personality

4.1 Anniwaa's doubleness

The slave trade and the consequent diaspora created a particular type of cultural contact, which gives shape to hybrid identities.[274] This hybridity is well represented by African American slave descendants, whose identity, according to W.E.B. Du Bois, is based on "double consciousness", splitting their souls into two unreconciled parts: both American and Negro.[275] Paul Gilroy expands Du Bois' notion of "double consciousness" by claiming that hybrid identity, resulting from the sense of not belonging to Africa and being excluded from the new motherland, is not only a feature chracterising African American culture, but it rather involves the entire African diaspora. Slave descendants have indeed faced the problem of being part of, and at the same time, marginalised from the modern Western world.[276] Therefore, the concepts of hybridity and transnationality are crucial for the understanding of the "double consciousness" at the basis of the indentity formation of individuals who are both European and black, American and black or British and black. These notions can indeed offer a different perspective, which is not Eurocentric, on history and culture.[277]

Jackie Kay, who is both Scottish and black, feels deeply involved in this discourse on "double consciousness" and this is why many of her works deal with it. For instance, some of her poems focus on her experience as an adopted child trying to find out some information about her African roots: this attempt is described by Kay as "trying to have two lives simultaneously as one" and is related to the struggle against a split identity.[278] Therefore, most of her works are written in the attempt to reconcile her "double allegiances", namely her connection with Africa and her Scottish background.[279] Petra Tournay-Theodotou indeed describes Kay's works as

> a subtle investigation into the complexities of a multivalent diasporic identity trying to contest the disintegrating forces of racial heritage, cultural location and personal affiliation.[280]

274 Kowaleski, p. 69.
275 Falola, p. 73.
276 Oboe, p. 240.
277 Oboe, p. 242.
278 Tournay-Theodotou (2014 b), p. 16.
279 Tournay-Theodotou (2014 b), p. 19.
280 Tournay-Theodotou (2014 b), p. 19.

Moreover, this interpretation of Kay's works appears to be confirmed by an interview of 2007. In this interview by Nick Thorpe, Kay indeed questions the definition of "home" by indirectly referring to the notions of hybridity and transantionality, which seem to be at the core of her writing:

> For a writer, home is the place we have to question: is it a state of mind, is it a house, is it a bit of landscape? Is it blood, is it soil? Is it roots? For me it's a very complex question: where do you belong? Everything that I write somehow feeds into that question.[281]

In the same interview, Kay explains how, in *The Lamplighter*, she choses the character of Anniwaa to represent split identity deriving from the need of many African slaves to deny their past of violence and oppression:

> The Lamplighter was denying her past, as African people often have done – wanting, understandably, to get away from it. So I invented a child self for her, trapped in a Cape Cod fort until she could turn round and look at her – and that became quite a powerful, dramatic thing. She's lost her accent, she's lost herself, she doesn't really know who she is or where she's from.[282]

One of the main effects of the trauma of slavery is thus split identity and is interpreted by Kay through the initial incapability of the Lamplighter to reconcile to her past of slavery, represented by Anniwaa. As suggested by Kay herself in the previously mentioned interview, Anniwaa's double personality, resulting from the loss of her freedom and roots, is underlined in the play through the following words:

> I can feel but I can't see myself. I can feel I am not my self.[283]

In scene three, it is indeed possible to notice that, because of the traumatic experiences of capture, captivity and the Middle Passage, Anniwaa starts to be involved in a process of dissociation of the self. The final splitting of her identity and its representation through the duality between Anniwaa and the Lamplighter, that is two identities of the same person, are made clear in scene six. In this scene, the Lamplighter tries to remember her past before slavery:

> Seems another me
> lived that blessed life, another girl -
> girl, deep in the interior country
> far away from the coast,
> a girl who had never ever seen the sea,
> a girl who climbed to the top of trees.
> I like to think she is up there, still,
> mysterious, magical girl,

281 Thorpe, p. 2.
282 Thorpe, p. 1.
283 Kay (2008), p. 13.

that she would never ever
hear this story.[284]

In this passage, the readers realise that Anniwaa and the Lamplighter obviously share the same past, but the Lamplighter, not being able to assimilate the trauma, wants to detach her life in Africa before slavery from the period of enslavement. This necessity to avoid the traumatic past can be explained through psychoanalytic theory, according to which an unclaimed traumatic experience can originate a dissociated personality. The historian and theorist of Trauma Studies, Dominick LaCapra, indeed claims that there are two possible ways of remembering traumatic events: "acting out" and "working through". The process of "acting out", that is the compulsive repetition of the past traumatic event in the present, can be used to describe the initial condition of the Lamplighter, characterised by the refusal to accept the past and the consequent splitting of identity. By contrast, "working through" means gaining a "critical distance" on the traumatic experience, enabling the assimilation of the past: the Lamplighter seems to reach this condition only at the end of the work.[285] These notions can help understand the opposition between the constant desire of the Lamplighter to forget and, at the same time, the need to remember. This is clearly represented by the "interior dialogue between the two parts of her self"[286]:

ANNIWAA:
My name is Anniwaa.

LAMPLIGHTER:
There are things I can't help but remember.

ANNIWAA:
Remember my name is Anniwaa.

LAMPLIGHTER:
There are things I wish I could forget.

ANNIWAA:
Don't forget my name is Anniwaa.

LAMPLIGHTER:
These are the things I cannot stop remembering;
these are the things I cannot stop forgetting.[287]

284 Kay (2008), p. 24.
285 Nadalini, pp. 60-61.
286 Tournay-Theodotou (2014 a), p. 167.
287 Kay (2008), p. 35.

Anniwaa insists on remembering her name in order to remind the other traumatised part of herself, namely the Lamplighter, not to forget her African roots and her life before slavery; however, the Lamplighter appears to be trapped into the constant dialectic between oblivion and remembering.[288]

At the beginning of scene eleven called *Runaway*, the split personality characterising the Lamplighter is increasingly clear: the Lamplighter and Anniwaa indeed repeat almost the same lines, showing once again that they represent two parts of the same dissociated identity:

LAMPLIGHTER:
I am running to my mama, she is wearing her yellow head tie.

ANNIWAA:
I am running to my mama, today she is wearing her yellow head tie.

LAMPLIGHTER:
She is the lamp that guides me.

ANNIWAA:
I have been running away since I was eleven,
nearly twelve years old.[289]

At this point, the Lamplighter begins to recognise her past, but she is still unable to completely embrace it. The process of "working through" seems to be completed only in the last scene, depicting the final assimilation of her past and the therapeutic possibility of telling her story:

LAMPLIGHTER:
And one day the years caught up with me
I turned round, and there they were,
All the years,

ANNIWAA:
There I was

LAMPLIGHTER:
The years, facing me. Her hair plaited with thread. She has climbed down from the tree. She is wearing her mother's yellow head-tie. Her arms on her hips

BLACK HARRIOT:
Eyes steady

MARY:
Mouth open

288 Tournay-Theodotou (2014 a), p. 167.
289 Kay (2008), p. 61.

CONSTANCE:
Words ready

ANNIWAA:
To be spoken

BLACK HARRIOT:
This is not the end

LAMPLIGHTER:
Only when I turned and faced her,
Standing there like that,
Could I begin to tell this story.[290]

The presence of the voices of the other slave women is particularly relevant because it shows how the "communality of experiences" can help the Lamplighter to face her painful story and tell it.[291] However, this positive interpretation suggesting recovery from trauma can be challenged by the circular structure of the work. Shortly after the above-mentioned lines, Anniwaa indeed repeats the same words of the beginning of the text:

> Once upon a time, I lived in a house with a cone shaped roof, in a big compound. My mother grew okra and pumpkin in her yard. My father shaped woods and metals.[292]

This circularity could suggest that accepting and telling a traumatic past is likely to cause the "reenactment of the trauma itself", represented here by the strategy of repetition.[293] Therefore, Kay appears to leave room for two possible interpretations, as Petra Tournay-Theodotou also stresses:

> The circular structure of the text, which begins and ends with Anniwaa's memories of her native village in Africa and subsequent capture into slavery, can be interpreted in psychoanalytical terms as an indication of the recovery of wholeness "to recompose her fragmented identity" (Angeletti 2013, 227) or as a suggestion that slavery is not over yet (Bringas López 2010, 9).[294]

In conclusion, Anniwaa and the Lamplighter, two entities of the same self, the first representing the past before slavery and the second representing the painful experience of ensalvement, clearly exemplify split personality resulting from trauma and from the paradoxical opposition between the need to forget the traumatic event and that to remember and assimilate it.

290 Kay (2008), pp. 93-94.
291 Nadalini, p.61.
292 Kay (2008), p. 95.
293 Nadalini, pp. 59-60.
294 Tournay-Theodotou (2014 a), p. 167.

4.2 Primo Levi as a chemist, a survivor and a writer

The Holocaust divides history into a time before it and a time after it. This general consideration appears to be deeply personal for Primo Levi: in *Se questo è un uomo*, the time before Auschwitz is depicted as a mythical time characterised by a lost childhood; on the contrary, the time after Auschwitz seems to be impossible. Therefore, Auschwitz represents a fracture in history and memory and it is the cause of another fracture, that is the dissociation of the self. Because of the several deprivations characterising the life of the lager and leading to dehumanisation, Levi is no longer able to see himself as a single individual: he is indeed deprived of everything related to his past; for this reason, it could be said that his identity splits into two parts, one related to his memories before Auschwitz and the other one affected by the traumatic experience of the lager.[295]

In the chapter called *Esame di chimica*, Levi's past as a Chemistry student and his traumatic present in the lager intermingle and, in this way, the deportee appears to reconcile with his past as a chemist.[296] During the examination, Levi indeed claims:

> - Mi sono laureato a Torino nel 1941, summa cum laude, - e, mentre lo dico, ho la precisa sensazione di non essere creduto, a dire il vero non ci credo io stesso, basta guardare le mie mani sporche e piegate, i pantaloni da forzato incrostati di fango. Eppure sono proprio io, il laureato di Torino[...].[297]

Levi struggles to recognise himself because of the dehumanising conditions of the camp and, although at the end of the above-mentioned passage, he seems to be able to reconcile with his past, the dissociation of the self can be confirmed by another passage of the same chapter:

> Oggi, questo vero oggi in cui io sto seduto a un tavolo e scrivo, io stesso non sono convinto che queste cose sono realmente accadute.[298]

Levi's testimony is here described as weak and incredulous: Levi himself doubts of his own memory, affected by his split personality. The subject “io” is strongly repeated twice, but this subject is destroyed by the loss of certainties and the alterations of the past, identity and memory.[299] This clear rupture between the life before Auschwitz and that after it, causing the splitting of Levi's personality, is further underlined in the following passage of the book:

295 Mariani (2011), p. 138.
296 Mariani (2011), p. 139.
297 Levi (2014), p. 103.
298 Levi (2014), p. 100.
299 Mariani (2011), p. 140.

> L'anno scorso a quest'ora io ero un uomo libero: fuori legge ma libero, avevo un nome e una famiglia, possedevo una mente avida e inquieta e un corpo agile e sano. Pensavo a molte lontanissime cose: al mio lavoro, alla fine della guerra, al bene e al male, alla natura delle cose e alle leggi che governano l'agire umano; e inoltre alle montagne, a cantare, all'amore, alla musica, alla poesia. Avevo una enorme, radicata, sciocca fiducia nella benevolenza del destino, e uccidere e morire mi parevano cose estranee e letterarie. […] Della mia vita di allora non mi resta oggi che quanto basta per soffrire la fame e il freddo; non sono più abbastanza vivo per sapermi sopprimere.[300]

There is a clear distinction between the elements characterising Levi's life as a free man, for instance love, music and poetry; and the aspects related to the life conditions of the lager, namely hunger and cold. Because of the loss of his name, family and freedom, Levi feels no longer alive: all the elements related to culture and civilisation, making him a human being, are erased by the dehumanising experience of the lager.

In *Se questo è un uomo*, Levi aims at studying the "animal man" in extreme conditions and he seems to highlight the hybrid and ambiguous features inherent to human nature. This hybridity, Levi identifies in human nature, can also define his own identity. The same split personality, resulting from the trauma of the lager, also characterises Levi's life after Auschwitz: he indeed struggles to reconcile his career as both a chemist and a writer and his responsibility as a survivor.[301] Although Levi received a humanist education, he became a chemist and, after the terrible experience of Auschwitz, a writer. This seems to confirm the hybrid nature of his personality.[302] However, Levi is able to identify a relationship between science and literature: he is indeed interested in the combinations of words and Chemistry itself is based on the combinations of different elements.[303] Levi's main aim is that of creating a dimension in which science, poetry and ethics can coexist. He indeed considers Chemistry as linked to literature because both of them can be used to explore the most ambiguous and unknown aspects of the universe and give meaning to them.[304] Therefore, his self is split into two parts, which he constantly tries to reconcile, as François Rastier also suggests:

> Entrambe minacciate dai medesimi programmi di disumanizzazione, la scienza e l'arte si conciliano, nella riflessione di Levi, come le due metà di se stesso.[305]

In the attempt to reconcile these two halves of himself, Levi applies to literature the

300 Levi (2014), pp. 140-141.
301 Porro, p. 90.
302 Porro, p. 121.
303 Porro, p. 15.
304 Rastier, p. 156.
305 Rastier, p. 156.

same clarity and accuracy which usually characterise science: this is why, as already noted, *Se questo è un uomo* can be defined by Levi himself "studio pacato di alcuni aspetti dell'animo umano".[306]

It could thus be said that Levi's dissociated self is fragmented into different "paranoid cracks": though the fracture between deportee and survivor is the most traumatic and completely avoids the "wholeness" of the self, the opposition between the professions of chemist and writer is still relevant; furthermore, the apparent contradiction between the role of witness and the writer of fiction represents another important fracture.[307] As previously mentioned, Levi did not only write about his experience in the camp, he also wrote poetry and science-fiction. However, he was fully aware of the risk represented by writing fiction: his moral responsibility as a witness of the Holocaust could be damaged by his choice to write about fictionalised events and leave aside his testimony. A clear example of this risk is the collection of short stories *Storie naturali*: as already noted, this book was published under a pseudonym, that is Damiano Malabaila, which basically means "bad nurse". Levi admits that the sounds of this name convey, in his opinion, an idea of contamination, evil and curse. In this sense, these short stories, not directly dealing with the experience of the lager, could question the authenticity of Levi's writing and, for this reason, Levi himself speaks of "subdolo inganno".[308] Levi thinks that his main aim as a survivor is to transmit his personal experience and that of the victims, who do not have the possibility to tell their stories. Therefore, writing fiction appears to distract Levi from his primary role as a witness and it can almost be considered as a "sin", namley the "sin of fiction".[309] However, Domenico Scarpa points out that the need to bear the memory of the Holocaust and of its victims has always been accompanied by another "vocation", namely the writing of fantastic stories chracterised by creative invention and technical-scientific knowledge.[310] Thanks to the ambiguity of science-fiction, Levi seems to be able to express the different parts of his identity: the traumatic experience of the deportee, his work as a chemist and the creativity of the writer. Therefore, writing fiction can represent a way to overcome the

306 Mariani (2011), p. 143.
307 Vuohelainen & Chapman, p. 164.
308 Mariani (2018), pp. 69-70.
309 Mariani (2018), p. 12.
310 Pianzola (2017 a), pp. 23-24.

“paranoid cracks” of a split personality.

Levi uses a methaphor to refer to his split identity, that is the mythological creature of the centaur. Levi uses this mythological reference to describe the splitting of his identity between chemist and writer, Jewish and Italian, deportee and survivor. Nonetheless, the centaur can also symbolise human condition, more in general.[311] The first time Levi used this metaphor was in 1946 or 1957 in the short story called *Il sesto giorno*; in 1961, the analogy between human beings and the centaur was reintroduced in another short story called *Quaestio de centauris*, which is part of the collection *Storie naturali*. This collection seems to mark the passage from Levi the witness to Levi the writer because he is finally able to use the technical-scientific knowledge of the chemist to write fictionalised stories, which do not exclusively deal with the Holocaust. As a result, the metaphor of the centaur represents the possibility of making all the different components of his personality coexist and overcoming his interior fracture.[312] Nevertheless, in *Quaestio de centauris*, the centaur also represents human condition and arises questions about the basic features that define a human being. This can also be related to the exploration of the rupture between human dignity and dehumanisation: this reflection is well summarised by the hypothetical form of the title *Se questo è un uomo*.[313] Moreover, the hybridity of the centaur clearly refers to the ambiguity of human nature, constantly torn between desire and rationality, greed and self-restraint.[314] As already mentioned, these interior tensions also characterise Levi's split personality: this is why, in an interview of 1966, Levi compares himself to a centaur and argues that he is split into two halves, one related to his work as a chemist in a factory, and the other one related to his role as a writer and a witness.[315]

To conclude, a deeper analysis of Levi's works can offer a different perspective on his complex, ambivalent and hybrid identity, which appears to be extremely different from his clear and rational language. Literature, through its ambiguity and the interaction between conscious and subconscious, helps Levi express and partly accept the splitting of his personality, firstly due to the trauma of the lager and secondly to his two

311 Pianzola (2017 a), p. 47.
312 Pianzola (2017 a), p. 309.
313 Mariani (2018), pp. 75-76.
314 Pianzola (2017 a), p. 326.
315 Porro, p. 81.

professions.[316]

4.3 A chorus of voices

The victims of trauma are likely to develop a split personality; for this reason, they may find it very difficult to say "I" and tell their own traumatic experience. In the dramatised poem by Kay, the collective trauma of slavery is indeed conveyed through the polyphonic structure of the dialogue between the four slave women; similarly, in his testimony, Levi replaces the subject pronoun "I" with the first person plural "we", because his main aim is that of transmitting a collective experience. Both works are thus characterised by a chorus of voices, which are intended to represent the plurality of victims.

The Lamplighter, following the typical features of neo-slave narratives, is characterised by polyphony, which enables to convey the points of view of different characters involved in slavery. In addition, by using different "centres of enunciation", it is possible to reverse the great "master narrative of History".[317] As already noted, *The Lamplighter* can indeed be considered as a project to explore and denounce "England's hybrid roots" in slavery and the possible literary strategies aiming at accomplishing this task are "multiple voices and tellings", "conflicting points of view and fractured and irresolvable story lines".[318]

As a consequence, though the Lamplighter is the main voice of the play, her story is interwoven with the painful memories of the other enslaved women in order to create the impression "that any single story is a multiple one".[319] Furthermore, there is also an "interaction of discourses of the oppressor and the oppressed" because the testimonies of the slave women seem to engage in dialogue with the "white male" and " mostly pro-slavery discourse" of MacBean.[320] For instance, in scene two called *Shipping News*, where MacBean provides reports on weather conditions and on the decreasing number of slaves, the voice of male authority is interrupted by the chorus of the slave women, as underlined by the following stage directions:

316 Mariani (2018), p. 233.
317 Muñoz-Valdivieso, pp. 44-45.
318 Kowaleski, p. 70.
319 Kay (2008), p. 15.
320 Tournay-Theodotou (2014 a), p. 164.

> The voice of the Shipping Forecast will be interrupted by the voices of the four black women. These women form a chorus throughout the play.[321]

In this way, the dominant patriarchal discourse characterising the history of slavery seems to be totally reversed by multiple female and black voices. Throughout the work, the slave women often recontextualise the same words of MacBean, underlining the interdependence between the oppressor and the oppressed but, at the same time, their interruptions and repetitions can be functional to a "shift in power relations".[322]

The female characters of the play interact in a constant dialogue, which allows them to share their different stories and perspectives. This is the case of a part in scene six, where Constance tells her personal experience and the other enslaved women comment on it, adding their opinions and their similar stories:

> CONSTANCE:
> I could tell HouseLady didn't like it
> When Fatman did what he did to me.
> Next day, she'd punish me for
> His punishing ways.
> By the break of day, I was broken.
> By the close of day, I was broken.
>
> CONSTANCE:
> This story was repeated.
>
> LAMPLIGHTER:
> This story was repeated in the sugar mills.
>
> BLACK HARRIOT:
> This story was repeated in the tobacco fields.
>
> LAMPLIGHTER:
> This is the story of the Lamplighter.
>
> MARY:
> Related by herself.[323]

The insistence on the verb "repeated" seems to highlight the collective trauma of slavery, which, in different contexts, for example the above-mentioned "sugar mills" and "tobacco fields", is always characterised by violence, discrimination and sexual harrassment. Therefore, the chorus of the female voices can represent the experience of all slave women, as Petra Tournay-Theodotou also stresses, describing Kay's play in this

321 Kay (2008), p. 11.
322 Tournay-Theodotou (2014 a), p. 176.
323 Kay (2008), pp. 39-40.

way:

> it is not a usual play with a linear plot structure or conventional dialogue, but rather a loosely connected sequence of scenes that—despite their apparent chronological order—consists of fragmented, dislocated narratives—which, however, constantly converge and intersect to weave a common story representative of the experience of all enslaved women.[324]

The Lamplighter, in particular, takes on the responsibility to be the first "representative of all enslaved womankind" because she finds the strength to tell her traumatic story firsthand, as underlined by the above-mentioned expression "related by herself"; and, at the same time, she knows that her story resembles many other painful experiences related to slavery. It could be said once again that the Lamplighter's identity is split into her own person and the neccessity to give voice to a collective trauma.[325] As a result, the chorus of voices can also be functional to depict the split personality resulting from the trauma of slavery. Nevertheless, the "multiple narratives" and "choral structure" of *The Lamplighter* create a community of witnesses, which appears to be fundamental for the recovery from trauma.[326]

As previously noted, the trauma of the Holocaust also causes split personality; for this reason, Levi, in his works, seems to be unable to say "I". Writing an autobiography is almost impossible for him; this is why his "self-portrait" is "mediated by others".[327] The first person singular pronoun is thus replaced by the plural pronoun "we" because the identity of the witness is no longer independent and individual: his/her major task is indeed that of telling the stories of the people who were unable to survive the lager. This great responsibility represents one of the elements enabling survival; however, it can paradoxically contribute to the dissociation of the self. Levi felt almost guilty about his survival and, in order to give meaning to his life as a survivor, he decided to devote his entire life to tesimony. Although this testimony, including several different traumatic stories, appears to be indispensable, it destroys his individuality. The responsibility to testify about the experience of the other victims is thus at the core of Levi's entire existence; consequently, he seems to struggle to see his life as fully belonging to him.[328]

Despite the difficulties involved in testimony, such as the consequent split personality

324 Tournay-Theodotou (2014 a), p. 176.
325 Tournay-Theodotou (2014 a), p. 176.
326 Nadalini, p. 61.
327 Vuohelainen & Chapman, p. 164.
328 Mariani (2018), pp. 12-13.

and the pain of remembering, Levi's voice is a multiple one and has the possibility of speaking in place of all the unheard voices of the dead inmates of the lager. Maria Anna Mariani, referring to Levi, indeed claims:

> ha ospitato nella propria opera le esperienze dei morti compagni, facendosi cassa di risonanza di voci altrui e conferendo alla sua testimonianza una dimensione plurale.[329]

Similarly to *The Lamplighter*, *Se questo è un uomo* is thus characterised by a plural dimension: Kay uses the constant interaction of different voices to give the impression of a choral and multiple experience; instead, for the same purpose, Levi gradually abandons the use of the subject pronoun "I", replaced by the first person plural "we". A clear example of this is the following passage from *Se questo è un uomo*, in which the pronoun "we" is repeated several times to underline the different kinds of shared experiences characterising the collective trauma of the Holocaust:

> Noi abbiamo viaggiato fin qui nei vagoni piombati; noi abbiamo visto partire verso il niente le nostre donne e i nostri bambini; noi fatti schiavi abbiamo marciato cento volte avanti e indietro alla fatica muta, spenti nell'anima prima che dalla morte anonima. Noi non ritorneremo. Nessuno deve uscire di qui, che potrebbe portare al mondo, insieme col segno impresso nella carne, la mala novella di quanto, ad Auschwitz, è bastato animo all'uomo di fare dell'uomo.[330]

Not all the experiences quoted in this passage were directly lived through by Levi; however, the plural subject "noi" refer to all the victims who were unable to survive and safely come home, as suggested by the sentence "noi non ritorneremo". The main aim of the system of the concentration camps was that of exterminating the totality of the inmates, avoiding any kind of possible testimony; fortunately, this did not happen and Levi managed to transmit these collective traumatic experiences to future generations. Being a survivor, Levi felt the need to account for the most reliable voices, those of the people who experienced the complete trauma of the lager, finally leading to death. These voices, and the way in which they are transmitted by Levi, are well described by Maria Anna Mariani:

> Voci altre, le sole autentiche, raccontano per mezzo di uno: testimonianza per delega. […] Grazie alla delega a essere trasmessa non è più l'esperienza di un soggetto determinato, ma un flusso di esperienze singolari-plurali.[331]

The opposition between the voices of the survivors, which appear to be weaker and weaker because of the terrible consequences resulting from trauma, and the voices of

329 Mariani (2018), p. 11.
330 Levi (2014), p. 49.
331 Mariani (2011), p. 146.

the dead victims, who can paradoxiacally be the only trustworthy witnesses, is also the main topic of *Voci*, a poem by Levi:

Voci mute da sempre, o da ieri, o spente appena;
Se tu tendi l'orecchio ancora ne cogli l'eco.
Voci rauche di chi non sa più parlare,
Voci che parlano e non sanno più dire,
Voci che credono di dire,
Voci che dicono e non si fanno intendere:
Cori e cimbali per contrabbandare
Un senso nel messaggio che non ha senso,
Puro brusio per simulare
Che il silenzio non sia silenzio.
A vous parle, compaings de galle:
Dico per voi, compagni di baldoria
Ubriacati come me di parole,
Parole-spada e parole-veleno,
Parole-chiave e grimaldello,
Parole-sale, maschera e nepente.
Il luogo dove andiamo è silenzioso
O sordo. È il limbo dei soli e dei sordi.
L'ultima tappa devi correrla sordo,
L'ultima tappa devi correrla solo.

10 febbraio 1981[332]

The main themes of this powerful poem could also apply to Kay's *The Lamplighter*: the reference to silent voices, representing the victims of trauma, who are not heard and trusted; the role of the survivor, who struggles to make his/her voice heard and represent the other silent voices; the importance of words and communication, despite their vulnerability, to transmit a trauma, which appears to be meaningless and unutterable, as underlined by the line "un senso nel messaggio che non ha senso". To conclude, both Kay and Levi aim at dealing with precisely these topics by conveying a "stream" of collective experiences through a chorus of voices.

332 Levi (2017), p. 55.

Conclusion

This study is based on a series of controversial questions about the relationship between trauma and literature. Is trauma really unspeakable? Is it possible to find a new language and perspective which are able to deal with historical trauma? How can literature represent collective trauma? In order to answer these questions, I firstly explored the literary criticism related to Trauma Studies and then I focused on the possible connections between two works concerning the historical traumas of slavery and the Holocaust, namely Jackie Kay's *The Lamplighter* and Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo*. The notion of trauma has been analysed in the context of psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and neurobiology and it refers to the impossibility of assimilating a traumatic event, which is repeatedly relived in nightmares and hallucinations by the traumatised subject. These constant relivings could lead to the dissociation of the self into two identities: one unable to assimilate the trauma and the other one struggling to accept, or even forget, the traumatic past.

Trauma Studies try to apply this psychological interpretation to literary texts, and art in general, dealing with the great collective traumas of history. The basic assumption of Trauma Studies can indeed be summarised as follows: if trauma seems to be inaccessible from a rational point of view, literature, characterised by ambiguity and contradictions, may be the suitable means to investigate historical trauma and its memory. Literature can indeed contribute to the creation of a collective memory, which may be able to reinterpret the traumatic past in the attempt to reconcile present and future needs.[333]

In this context, the concepts of "prosthetic memory", introduced by Alison Landsberg and "postmemory", explored by Marianne Hirsch, are crucial. They indeed show that, although the apparently impossible assimilation of the trauma on the part of the traumatised mind, it is still possible for "post-generations", who did not direclty live through the traumatic event, to identify with a collective painful past and reinterpret it in the light of the present. Therefore, a literary text written by an author who did not experience the trauma firsthand, like the case of *The Lamplighter*, can still be functional

333 Eyerman, p. 4.

to the reinterpretation of the memory of the past in order to better understand our present. This is why collective memory, supported and reinforced by literary works going beyond national, social and ideological boundaries, can heal the psychological, cultural and historical ruptures caused by trauma. The formation of a collective memory engaging with historical trauma seems thus to be fundamental for the interpreation of history from a transnational and hybrid point of view, which may also allow to conceive the Holocaust and slavery as part of a single world history. The parallel analysis of these historical traumas, related to the notion of "cross-traumatic affiliation", can indeed offer a possible ethical and unifying understanding of the past and it may also enable a different interpretation of the official historical accounts. Literature and literary criticism can thus represent the means through which the master narrative of history is questioned and recontextualised and a collective memory is formed to fight against the inaccessibility of trauma and forgetfulness.

Although traumatic experiences appear to be unutterable, both Kay and Levi, through their above-mentioned works, aim at showing that trauma victims feel the urgent need to tell their dramatic stories and share them with someone who is able to trust them despite the difficulty to rationally understand the atrocities they lived through. Therefore, storytelling can be considered as a therapeutic reenactment of the traumatic past, which can help the victims to give sense to the unexplainable violence and discrimination they experienced. Storytelling thus represents the possibility to recognise and gradually assimilate the trauma thanks to the tranformation of traumatic memory into narrative and the transmission of it to others.

In *The Lamplighter*, the protagonist is finally able to reconcile her split identity and accept the painful memories related to slavery thanks to the sharing of her story. The slave women indeed form a community, allowing them to tell their experiences and listen to those of the other women. This constant dialogue, showing the different terrible facets of slavery, enables the slave women to overcome the pain of remembering, directly face their traumatic past and finally survive. Storytelling also represents a source of survival in *Se questo è un uomo*, where Levi explains that the main reason why he was able to survive the extreme conditions of the camp of Auschwitz is the possibility to tell his story and transmit it to future generations. As it happens in *The*

Lamplighter, Levi needs to share his experience and be heard; this is why he compares the necessity of storytelling to the basic needs to eat and be free. Furthermore, Levi describes the days in which he and other two inmates waited for the arrival of the Russian forces and told each other their personal stories as the moments in which they found the strength to survive. The formation of a community based on storytelling and communication is here, as in the case of the slave women of Kay's play, fundamental for the passage from the supposed inaccessibility of trauma to its positive reenactment and possible acceptance.

Another important role of storytelling in these works is that of giving voice to the victims of collective traumas, who cannot speak because they were exterminated or erased from the official historical accounts. For this reason, Levi feels responsible for the inmates who did not survive the Holocaust and believes that the main role of the survivor is telling the stories of the dead victims. Similarly, Kay aims at "re-writing" the history of slavery from the point of view of black slave women, reversing the master narrative of history usually told from the perspective of Western, white, male dominant discourse. In both works, the authors aim at representing the unheard and marginalised voices of trauma victims and literature thus seems to be a suitable means to reinterpret history and its traumatic events.

Another theme characterising both *The Lamplighter* and *Se questo è un uomo* is dehumanisation. Black slaves and the inmates of the Nazi camps were indeed deprived of everything that could define a human being: they lost freedom, their homes, their families and even their names. Their dramatic living conditions could be compared to those of animals and they were treated like mere objects, which can be owned, sold, bought, used or eliminated. They could be considered as "subhumans", no longer able to think, desire, decide, hope, love or hate: their souls and minds were emptied. This annihilation of human dignity is also depicted in the poem *Buna* by Levi:

Piedi piegati e terra maledetta,
Lunga la schiera nei grigi mattini.
Fuma la Buna dai mille camini,
Un giorno come ogni giorno ci aspetta.
Terribili nell'alba le sirene:
"Voi moltitudine dai visi spenti,
Sull'orrore monotono del fango
È nato un altro giorno di dolore".

Compagno stanco ti vedo nel cuore,
Ti leggo gli occhi compagno dolente.
Hai dentro il petto freddo fame niente
Hai rotto dentro l'ultimo valore.
Compagno grigio fosti un uomo forte,
Una donna ti camminava al fianco.
Compagno vuoto che non hai più nome,
Uomo deserto che non hai più pianto,
Così povero che non hai più male,
Così stanco che non hai più spavento,
Uomo spento che fosti un uomo forte:
Se ancora ci trovassimo davanti
Lassù nel dolce mondo sotto il sole,
Con quale viso ci staremmo a fronte?

28 dicembre 1945[334]

This poem describes the inhuman conditions of the inmates of Auschwitz; however, this description, defining the victims as "moltitudine dai visi spenti", "compagno vuoto che non hai più nome", "uomo deserto" and "uomo spento", can also be applied to the slave women of Kay's dramatised poem and their dehumanising experiences. For instance, the prisoners of the camps were deprived of their names and were identified by means of numbers; similarly, black slaves were given new names when they were bought by new masters. The loss of their names can be associated to the loss of their identity and human condition and it is well represented by the above-mentioned line "compagno vuoto che non hai più nome". Therefore, dehumanisation can be described as a process affecting the body, the mind, individual identity and human dignity.

However, both authors provide some examples of resistance to dehumanisation: in particular, cultural heritage appears to be a valuable way to bear the inhuman conditions of slavery and the lagers and possibly overcome the incommunicability of trauma. Cultural heritage is indeed something which the perpetrators are not able to erase; therefore, it may represent a form of freedom and agency.

In *The Lamplighter*, it is possible to find several intertexts related to music: song lyrics, quotations from religious discourse and spirituals. The musical tradition was indeed extremely important for slaves in order to denounce the atrocities of slavery and create a black cultural heritage in opposition to white European culture. In this way, music represents a form of non-violent and subtle rebellion. Furthermore, by reading and listening to Kay's play chracterised by a strong orality, it is clear that slaves used to sing

334 Levi (2017), p. 13.

in order to bear the fatigue of hard labour and create strong community ties helping them resist dehumanisation. Musical and oral traditions were indeed fundamental for socialisation and domestic life.

In *Se questo è un uomo*, the same role which music has in Kay's work is played by cultural knowledge and in particular literature. There is a sort of "humanism" which helps Levi resist the dehumanising conditions of the lager. Levi mainly shows the importance of culture and literature in the fight against dehumanisation in the chapter called *Il canto di Ulisse*, where the reference to Dante's *Divina Commedia* is clear. In this chapter, the power of words seems to be emphasised and creates a strong connection between Levi and Pikolo, who, during a break from work, "dare" to talk about literature in a place where communication and art are completely excluded. Their conversation is indeed characterised by reciprocity and dialectics and, for this reason, it gives them the possibility to reacquire human dignity through a cultural dimension. Therefore, Dante's literature appears to be a powerful means to go beyond the incommunicability characterising the oppressive world of the lager.

The process of dehumanisation previously described has a relevant consequence on trauma victims, that is split personality. Trauma victims are usually unable to reconcile their traumatic past to their present; as a result, their identity splits into two unreconciled parts, one constantly reliving the traumatic event and the other trying to forget it. The necessity to remember and assimilate the trauma is indeed always associated with the desire to forget the painful experiences of the past. Kay and Levi try to convey this dramatic consequence of trauma in different ways.

The main character of Kay's play, the Lamplighter, suffers from split personality: her past of slavery is represented by the enslaved child Anniwaa; instead, her life after slavery and her attempt to overcome trauma is represented by the Lamplighter, who, thanks to the the possibility of sharing her story with a community of slave women, appears to be finally able to accept her past.

During his detention in the camp, Levi struggles to recognise himself because the terrible conditions of the lager have transformed the Chemistry student into a "subhuman". The dissociation of the self thus begins in the lager but continues after his liberation. Levi indeed compares himself to a centaur divided into different entities: first

of all, his work as a chemist and a writer; secondly, the moral responsibility of the survivor and the love for creativity and invention, which leads him to write fiction. Literature, through its ambiguous and contradictory nature, seems to offer Levi the possibility of expressing his interior fractures and partly accepting them.

Kay and Levi use similar literary strategies to convey the dissociation of the self and the plurality characterising collective trauma. It is indeed possible to define their works as a chorus of voices. Kay's play is characterised by the constant dialogue between the four slave women and the superposition of their voices and that of MacBean, representing white pro-slavery discourse. The shared, and at the same time different, stories of the slave women are in opposition with MacBean's perspective and the chorality of the slave women's dialogue underlines the desire to assert their subject position. Kay's main aim is indeed that of giving voice to the victims of slavery, who are marginalised by the great narrative of history. Similarly, Levi aims at transmitting the painful stories of those inmates who did not survive Auschwitz. As a consequence, he finds impossible to use the first person singular pronoun "I", showing once again his split identity, and replaces it with the plural pronoun "we". This choice underlines the plurality of victims and their common experiences, as it happens in *The Lamplighter*.

To conclude, I would like to underline how these works and the reinterpretations they give of two massive historical traumas, such as slavery and the Holocaust, can still be relevant nowadays. *The Lamplighter* and *Se questo è un uomo* and their parallel analysis, also showing the possible connections between the above-mentioned historical events, can represent a powerful means to maintain and reinforce memory. The memory of these historical events appears to be particularly important today: a time in which negationism concerning the Holocaust and oblivion related to slavery still represent two serious problems affecting society, culture and politics. Moreover, these works show how literature can be functional to the education of new generations finally free from antisemitism and racism.

As happened several times throughout this study, I would like to quote a poem by Levi to better exemplify the conclusions it is possible to draw from the parallel analysis of *The Lamplighter* and *Se questo è un uomo*:

Non spaventati se il lavoro è molto:

C'è bisogno di te che sei meno stanco.
Poiché hai sensi fini, senti
Come sotto i tuoi piedi suona cavo.
Rimedita i nostri errori:
C'è stato pure chi, fra noi,
S'è messo in cerca alla cieca
Come un bendato ripeterebbe un profilo,
E chi ha salpato come fanno i corsari,
E chi ha tentato con volontà buona.
Aiuta, insicuro. Tenta, benché insicuro,
Perché insicuro. Vedi
Se puoi reprimere il ribrezzo e la noia
Dei nostri dubbi e delle nostre certezze.
Mai siamo stati così ricchi, eppure
Viviamo in mezzo a mostri imbalsamati,
Ad altri mostri oscenamente vivi.
Non sgomentarti delle macerie
Né del lezzo delle discariche: noi
Ne abbiamo sgomberate a mani nude
Negli anni in cui avevamo i tuoi anni.
Reggi la corsa, del tuo meglio. Abbiamo
Pettinato la chioma alle comete,
Decifrato i segreti della genesi,
Calpestato la sabbia della luna,
Costruito Auschwitz e distrutto Hiroshima.
Vedi: non siamo rimasti inerti.
Sobbarcati, perplesso;
Non chiamarci maestri.

24 giugno 1986[335]

Levi wrote this poem, whose title is *Delega*, in 1986 and it may seem that he is directly addressing future generations in order to warn them about the dangerous possibility of repeating past mistakes. By means of the imperative verbs “senti”, “rimedita”, “aiuta”, “tenta”, “vedi”, “non sgomentarti”, “reggi”, “sobbarcati” and “non chiamarci”, Levi highlights the responsibility younger generations have of reflecting on the terrible implications of hate, greed, power, war and racism. Therefore, Kay's play and Levi's testimony should be interpreted as special tools to create a collective memory necessary to rethink our traumatic history and possibly avoid the same unrecoverable mistakes of the past.

335 Levi (2017), pp. 108-109.

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Riassunto

Il termine trauma, nel suo significato originario, indicava solamente delle lesioni del corpo; mentre, grazie agli studi della psichiatria e della psicoanalisi, a partire dal XIX secolo, si è cominciato ad usare questo termine in relazione a delle esperienze molto dolorose che coinvolgono anche lo stato d'animo e la mente del soggetto traumatizzato. In seguito ad un evento traumatico, si è incapaci di assimilare razionalmente l'esperienza vissuta e, di conseguenza, si rivive l'evento in questione in incubi e allucinazioni. Questa mancata razionalizzazione e assimilazione del trauma può causare una dissociazione dell'identità: l'individuo, infatti, si trova diviso tra la necessità di dimenticare il dolore legato al fatto traumatico e il continuo ripetersi del trauma nella sua mente.

Estendendo questa definizione ad una dimensione più plurale, si parla anche di trauma storico per indicare un evento traumatico collettivo di grande portata. Dei chiari esempi di trauma storico sono la tratta degli schiavi africani e l'Olocausto. Le due opere al centro di questo studio, *The Lamplighter* di Jackie Kay e *Se questo è un uomo* di Primo Levi, trattano proprio questi due traumi collettivi che hanno profondamente segnato la storia dell'umanità intera. L'analisi parallela delle due opere appena citate e delle possibili connessioni tra la storia della schiavitù e quella della Shoa possono risultare utili a dimostrare le potenzialità della letteratura nella rappresentazione dei traumi storici.

Nel contesto di un ambito della critica letteraria chiamato "Trauma Studies", si è molto dibattuto circa la possibilità di rappresentare il trauma, apparentemente indecifrabile e inspiegabile, attraverso l'arte. Tuttavia, la teoria alla base di questa critica letteraria e su cui si fonda questo studio è la seguente: se il trauma sembra essere inaccessibile razionalmente, la letteratura, attraverso la sua natura ambigua e contraddittoria, potrebbe essere uno strumento prezioso per l'interpretazione dei traumi storici e della loro memoria. Infatti, la letteratura può contribuire alla creazione di una memoria collettiva in grado di reinterpretare un trauma storico allo scopo di riconciliare passato e presente.

A questo riguardo, i concetti di "prosthetic memory" e "postmemory" sono

estremamente importanti, perché dimostrano che, nonostante l'apparente impossibilità di assimilare correttamente un trauma, le generazioni non direttamente coinvolte da esso possono comunque identificarsi con un passato traumatico collettivo e dare ad esso un nuovo senso alla luce del presente. Quindi, la reinterpretazione del passato dal punto di vista di scrittori o artisti che non hanno vissuto un evento traumatico in prima persona può rivelarsi utile per la migliore comprensione del nostro passato e presente. Per questo motivo, la formazione di una memoria collettiva, supportata da opere letterarie che superano i confini nazionali, sociali e ideologici, è necessaria al fine di ricucire gli "strappi" psicologici, culturali e storici causati da traumi collettivi. Inoltre, questo tipo di memoria può rappresentare anche uno strumento per la lettura della storia da un punto di vista transnazionale e ibrido, che possa persino includere la schiavitù e l'Olocausto all'interno di un'unica grande narrazione storica universale. Questa analisi più inclusiva dei traumi storici offre una visione più etica e globale del passato e rende possibile una diversa interpretazione degli archivi storici ufficiali. La letteratura, dunque, potrebbe essere utilizzata allo scopo di ricontestualizzare la narrazione dominante della storia e creare una memoria collettiva capace di opporsi all'inaccessibilità del trauma e all'oblio in cui sono caduti alcuni importanti fatti storici.

Una delle più evidenti caratteristiche del trauma è l'incomunicabilità, ossia l'incapacità di descrivere attraverso la parola un evento traumatico e le emozioni legate ad esso. Nonostante ciò, quello che tentano di fare Jackie Kay e Primo Levi nelle loro opere è proprio utilizzare il linguaggio della letteratura per dare voce a delle esperienze apparentemente inspiegabili e inenarrabli. Forse precisamente a questo scopo, uno dei temi più rilevanti affrontati dai due autori è il superamento del trauma attraverso la parola, la comunicazione e la condivisione della propria storia traumatica. Le vittime del trauma, infatti, sentono il bisogno urgente di raccontare quello che hanno vissuto e di essere ascoltate e credute: il racconto delle loro storie può risultare, quindi, terapeutico, una volta superato il dolore del ricordo. La transformazione della memoria legata all'evento traumatico in narrazione e la transmissione di essa ad altri possono rappresentare due importanti fasi alla base dell'assimilazione e della comprensione del trauma.

Nell'opera di Kay, si assiste alla graduale evoluzione della protagonista, soprannominata

Lamplighter, che lotta tra la volontà di condividere la propria storia di schiavitù con le altre donne e la difficoltà nel ricordare il suo passato traumatico. Lamplighter riesce ad affrontare questa rottura interna solo alla fine dell'opera, grazie al dialogo continuo che intrattiene con le altre schiave. Queste donne riescono a sopportare le atrocità della schiavitù attarverso la formazione di una comunità femminile in cui si sentono finalmente ascoltate, protette e capite.

La sopravvivenza è direttamente legata alla testimonianza e alla condivisione anche in *Se questo è un uomo*. Infatti, Levi confessa che una delle ragioni per cui riuscì ad uscire vivo da Auschwitz è proprio la volontà di raccontare la sua storia e quella delle vittime che non hanno avuto la fortuna di sopravvivere. Il bisogno di condividere la sua esperienza nel lager è così forte in Levi che viene paragonato a dei bisogni elementari, come il cibo e la libertà. Inoltre, verso la fine del libro, Levi racconta i giorni in cui le guardie naziste abbandonarono il campo e lui si trovò ad aspettare l'arrivo delle forze russe insieme ad altri due comapagni. In quel frangente, il loro appiglio alla vita era rappresentato dalla possibilità di raccontarsi le loro storie: ancora una volta, dunque, come avviene anche nel poema di Kay, Levi sembra voler sottolineare l'importanza della condivisione al fine di superare l'apparente incomunicabilità del trauma e raggiungere la sua accettazione.

Attraverso il racconto dell'esperienza traumatica, Kay e Levi riescono a creare uno spazio dedicato alle voci delle vittime, spesso inascoltate e lasciate ai margini del racconto storico. Per questo motivo, Levi ritiene che il primo compito del sopravvissuto sia proprio quello di diffondere la storia di tutti i prigionieri del lager che non sono riusciti a sopravvivere per raccontare la propria esperienza. Levi si sente responsabile nei loro confronti e non vuole permettere che il tempo cancelli la loro memoria. Una simile responsabilità è stata assunta da Kay quando decide di scrivere *The Lamplighter*: il suo scopo è, infatti, quello di "riscrivere" la storia della schiavitù dal punto di vista di quattro donne schiave, in modo tale da stravolgere la narrazione dominante della storia, che di solito vede al centro un punto di vista "bianco", occidentale e maschile.

Un altro tema che accomuna queste due opere è il processo di disumanizzazione a cui sono sottoposte le vittime dei due traumi storici presi in considerazione. Infatti, gli schiavi africani e i prigionieri di Auschwitz venivano privati delle loro case, dei loro

cari, della libertà e persino dei loro nomi. I nomi originari degli africani che presero parte alla tratta degli schiavi venivano sostituiti con altri nomi scelti dai nuovi padroni; mentre, i detenuti del lager venivano identificati per mezzo di una serie di numeri tatuati sull'avambraccio sinistro. La perdita dei loro nomi rappresenta anche la perdita della loro identità, spesso collegata alla fine di ogni dignità umana: infatti, le condizioni inumane in cui vivevano, la violenza e la discriminazione che caratterizzavano la loro quotidianità riducevano degli esseri umani al livello di animali, o addirittura oggetti, che potevano essere posseduti, acquistati, venduti, scambiati, sfruttati ed, infine, eliminati. Sia le vittime della schiavitù che quelle dell'Olocausto vengono descritte in queste opere come degli esseri svuotati di ogni capacità di intendere, volere, pensare, sperare, decidere, amare e odiare. Tutto quello che può definire la natura umana veniva tolto loro allo scopo di renderli simili ad animali e oggetti più facili da manipolare e, alla fine, uccidere. Il processo di disumanizzazione, quindi, coinvolgeva il corpo, lo spirito, l'identità e la dignità umana ed era funzionale all'asservimento e allo sfruttamento delle vittime.

Tuttavia, in entrambe le opere possiamo trovare esempi di ribellione e resistenza alla disumanizzazione. Nonostante le rivolte violente e i tentativi di fuga non andavano spesso a buon fine, sia gli schiavi che i prigionieri del lager trovavano altre forme di resistenza, soprattutto volte al mantenimento della loro individualità e della loro natura umana. L'esempio più chiaro è quello del patrimonio culturale come mezzo per evitare la disumanizzazione e la perdita della propria identità e persino superare l'insensatezza del trauma.

Il grande patrimonio culturale che in *The Lamplighter* sembra maggiormente messo in evidenza è la tradizione musicale degli schiavi africani. Il dialogo tra le donne protagoniste dell'opera è spesso interrotto da canzoni tradizionali, testi letti durante le funzioni religiose e cori spiritual. La musica, quindi, veniva utilizzata come fonte di sollievo durante le lunghe giornate di lavoro nelle piantagioni o nelle case dei padroni e, inoltre, alcune canzoni davano agli schiavi la possibilità di denunciare le atrocità che erano costretti a sopportare. In questo senso, la creazione di una tradizione musicale esclusivamente legata alla schiavitù permette di opporre alla cultura “bianca” e occidentale un'alternativa “nera”. Inoltre, il carattere orale della cultura “nera” è ben

rappresentato nell'intera opera di Kay, nella quale è possibile cogliere l'importanza dell'oralità e della musica per la formazione di forti legami all'interno delle comunità di schiavi, la cui vita domestica basata sullo scambio e la socializzazione era uno strumento prezioso per sopportare il trauma della schiavitù.

Lo stesso ruolo che in *The Lamplighter* è dedicato alla musica, è rivestito dalla letteratura in *Se questo è un uomo*. Infatti, nonostante le condizioni disumane del lager, Levi si affida spesso alla tradizione letteraria italiana per cercare di spiegare la sua insensata esperienza, superando l'incomunicabilità tipica del trauma. La sua testimonianza è intrisa di riferimenti alla *Divina Commedia*, come se l'inferno descritto da Dante possa essere la giusta metafora per rappresentare l'incubo di Auschwitz. Il riferimento più esteso al capolavoro di Dante è presente nel capitolo intitolato I*l canto di Ulisse*: durante una breve pausa dal lavoro, Levi cerca di insegnare qualche parola di italiano al compagno francese soprannominato Pikolo e sceglie come esempio il XVI canto dell' *Inferno*. Questa scelta appare coraggiosa in un luogo come il lager, dove l'arte e la cultura sono completamente soffocate dalla sofferenza e la morte. La conversazione tra i due, uno scambio equo in un contesto dominato dall'incomunicabilità e la disuguaglianza, è benefica per entrambi perché, riconoscendosi nelle parole di Dante, si riappropriano per un momento della loro dignità di uomini.

Una delle maggiori conseguenze del processo di disumanizzazione sopra descritto è lo sdoppiamento della personalità. Il soggetto traumatizzato, infatti, non è in grado di accettare il suo passato doloroso. Di conseguenza, la sua identità si divide in due parti: una parte in continua lotta contro il ricordo dell'evento traumatico e l'altra che cerca di vivere il presente, cancellando il trauma. Essendo state ridotte al livello di animali o oggetti, le vittime del trauma faticano a riacquistare la propria individualità e, per questo, vivono uno sdoppiamento che permette loro di sopportare il dolore derivato dall'esperienza disumana che hanno vissuto.

Lo sdoppiamento della personalità è rappresentato, in *The Lamplighter*, dalla protagonista e il suo "doppio", impersonato dalla bambina Anniwaa, che racconta il distaccamento forzato dal suo villaggio e dalla sua famiglia e la riduzione in schiavitù. Lamplighter riesce a ricongiungere le due entità di se stessa, una legata al suo passato di

schiava e l'altra che tenta di accettare il trauma, solo grazie alla condivisione della sua storia con le altre donne schiave. Solo alla fine, infatti, Lamplighter riconosce in Anniwaa se stessa e sembra parzialmente riappacificarsi col suo passato.

Levi, invece, non riconosce più se stesso all'interno del lager perché comprende che il processo di disumanizzazione lo sta allontanando sempre di più dallo studente di chimica che era prima di essere catturato e deportato ad Auschwitz. Una volta libero, la sensazione di essere diviso in due metà non svanisce e, anzi, Levi si paragona alla figura mitologica del centauro per esprimere il suo sdoppiamento in chimico e scrittore, in sopravvissuto con la responsabiltà di riportare la verità dei fatti e, allo stesso tempo, amante della creatività lettararia che lo porterà a scrivere racconti di finzione. Tuttavia, la letteratura, grazie alla sua natura multiforme e ibrida, sembra essere il luogo adatto ad ospitare le fratture interne all'animo di Levi.

Kay e Levi descrivono i traumi storici della schiavitù e dell'Olocausto come degli eventi plurali e collettivi che hanno coinvolto un numero enorme di persone. Al fine di rappresentare questa pluralità e la personalità multipla derivante dal trauma, i due autori utilizzano delle strategie letterarie ben precise, che permettono di identificare le due opere come un coro di voci. Il poema di Kay è, infatti, caratterizzato dal costante sovrapporsi delle voci delle quattro donne, a volte interrotte dalle parole di MacBean, che rappresenta il punto di vista dominante dell'uomo "bianco" occidentale. Le storie affini, e allo stesso tempo diverse, delle quattro schiave, però, ricoprono un ruolo nettamente maggiore rispetto alla voce di MacBean: in questo modo, Kay vuole evidenziare la riappropriazione della loro individualità da parte delle schiave e la necessità di dare voce a coloro che sono sempre stati esclusi dalla narrazione storica dominante. Anche Levi desidera trasmettere il punto di vista delle vittime che sono state private della possibilità di raccontare la loro storia. Dunque, Levi abbandona la prima persona singolare, con cui la sua personalità doppia non riesce più ad identificarsi, e si affida al pronome "noi" per trasmettere la pluralità delle vittime. Come sopravvissuto, infatti, Levi non vuole riferirsi solo alla sua esperienza personale, ma desidera farsi rappresentante di una collettività che ha perso la sua voce.

In conclusione, mi sembra importante sottolineare l'attualità di queste due opere e della loro interpretazione della schiavitù e dell'Olocausto. In un periodo storico come il

nostro, in cui il negazionismo legato alla Shoa e la tendenza a trascurare il passato schiavista di molti paesi europei rappresentano ancora due gravi problemi della nostra società, cultura e politica, l'analisi di queste opere letterarie, e di altre simili ad esse, può rivelarsi essenziale per la creazione di una memoria collettiva più stabile e duratura. È necessario ammettere che viviamo in un mondo in cui il razzismo e l'antisemitismo non sono ancora del tutto spariti e, anzi, in alcuni casi sembrano riemergere con una nuova forza. Questa è una ragione in più per sfruttare ogni mezzo a nostra disposizione, letteratura compresa, al fine di educare nuove generazioni finalmente libere da queste insensate e pericolose ideologie. Quindi, le opere di Kay e Levi possono essere degli strumenti indispensabili al mantenimento e al rafforzamento di una memoria capace di ricontestualizzare la nostra storia ed evitare gli stessi irrimediabili errori del passato.

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