

HSOC 4880-301: Making the Case for a Cultural Trauma

Spring 2025: TTh 3:30 to 4:59 p.m. (Location TBD)

Instructor

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Office Hours/Schedule Appointment
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**Please note: troubling and at times graphic material persists in this course. Please review course material in advance and reflect on your individual comfort level with the assigned readings and viewings before committing to this class.*

Course Description

"[T]he interiorization of disaster: a personal investment in a collective upheaval to which we have been witness, or from which we have inherited a sense of emergency." (Huet, Marie-Hélène. *The Culture of Disaster*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012. 78.).

The twenty-first century dawned for the United States with the airplane hijackings of September 11, 2001. That event has been characterized as traumatic for individuals at crash sites who witnessed or narrowly survived the destruction taking the lives of many around them, for those who grieved the loss of loved ones, and also for people who had no direct connection whatsoever either to the danger or to personal loss. What can it mean to have a single word apply to such divergent experiences?

In considering this question, we will first interrogate our premise term, "trauma," to understand its definitions and its uses under a variety of circumstances and across different disciplines. Specifically, we will draw on secondary readings from psychology, sociology, history, and literary and cultural studies to explore whether and how cultural trauma (as well as similar concepts, including social and collective trauma) might be distinct from psychological trauma.

We will also draw on primary sources, including within American popular culture, whose commonly accessible texts such as film and journalism occasion a site for meaning construction, negotiation, and contestation about historical events across a diversely and differentially situated population.

This approach structures our assessment of the implications of viewing an historical occurrence as "traumatic" for a group of people. As a capstone course in the Health and Societies (HSOC) major, this course is limited to second-semester juniors as well as seniors majoring in HSOC who each will produce a 20-page paper based on their own original questions and research.

Learning Objectives

After completing this course, students should be able to:

- Identify and differentiate between multiple definitions of trauma
- Identify and differentiate between multiple types of historical evidence
- Identify and critically assess characterizations of historical events as “culturally traumatic” through evidence-based arguments
- Conduct original research projects to address original research questions about historical events
- Self-reflexively evaluate their own values and beliefs about cultural trauma and historical events within the terms of class discussions and formal written arguments

Structure

This course meets twice each week for discussion-oriented class sessions when the concepts raised by readings and other assignments are clarified and discussed.

Students should be prepared to engage in discussion with the instructor and with one another with questions and original responses. This course features complex, multifaceted material that raises issues not easily resolvable with simple “yes” or “no” answers. Rather, students are called to think critically, working toward understanding and interpretation rather than mere memorization of course content.

Required Materials

The texts listed below (ISBN numbers provided so you can purchase the appropriate book at the [Penn Bookstore](#) or at the retailer of your choice) will be supplemented by readings and other resources posted on the Canvas course website. Please note: anyone experiencing technical difficulties with this website must seek swift resolution by directing questions to canvas@pobox.upenn.edu. For website postings, you are expected either to print them out and bring them to class or to have them open on your laptop.

Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. 4th ed. New York: Basic Books, 2022. [~\$15 new]

ISBN-10: 1541602951

ISBN-13: 978-1541602953

Janoff-Bulman, Ronnie. *Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma*. New York: The Free Press, 2002. [~\$15 new]

ISBN-10: 0743236254

ISBN-13: 978-0743236256

The following film is also required viewing by the due date scheduled on the syllabus course calendar.

Spielberg, Steven, dir. *Munich*. 2005; Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures.

Grading and Evaluation

I accept late assignments only through prior approval, before the date/time of the deadline, based on documentation of unavoidable, uncontrollable circumstances (i.e., NCAA athletic competition, religious observance, family emergency, health concern, etc.). It's always bad form to stand up or ghost someone!

When I excuse an absence in advance, participation credit can be earned through a one-page response paper to the readings discussed during the missed class, submitted by no later than the beginning of the following week's class.

So, let me know there is an issue as soon as you know there is an issue, and we can plan around it!

Participation	15%/15 points
Research Proposal Presentation	10%/10 points
Research Proposal	25%/25 points
Final Paper	50%/50 points [total = 100%/100 points]

A = 90-100: Demonstrates mastery of content and concepts and fulfills basic requirements [Specifically for participation: Contributes substantively to class discussion and exhibits meaningfully attentive behavior consistently]

B = 80-89: Demonstrates strong grasp of content and concepts and fulfills basic requirements [Specifically for participation: Contributes substantively to class discussion and exhibits meaningfully attentive behavior frequently]

C = 70-79: Demonstrates familiarity with content and concepts and fulfills basic requirements [Specifically for participation: Contributes substantively to class discussion and exhibits meaningfully attentive behavior occasionally]

D = 60-69: Demonstrates limited grasp of content and concepts and fulfills few basic requirements [Specifically for participation: Contributes substantively to class discussion and exhibits meaningfully attentive behavior rarely]

F = 0-59: Does not demonstrate knowledge of content and concepts and does not fulfill basic requirements [Specifically for participation: Contributes substantively to class discussion and exhibits meaningfully attentive behavior almost never]

Assignment Information

Participation: Students' questions and comments provide a good, real-time sense of how well the course material is being understood. At the same time, as we will learn in this class, multiple sites and voices construct shared knowledge over time. Moreover, the Thursday reading and writing workshops require each student to prepare in-progress work samples for collaborative engagement.

For these reasons, students' contributions to class discussion form an integral part of this course. Repeated late arrivals or early departures, like repeated absences, will negatively affect your grade. After all, you are asked to contribute substantively to discussion in each meeting of your class, and lateness and absence – as well as unpreparedness – necessarily hinder your ability to do so. Keep in mind, though, that only participation, and not attendance alone, is graded.

Research Proposal Presentation (in-class, 15 minutes = 5 minutes to talk, 10 minutes to discuss): For this presentation, you will share with the class the core ideas from the research proposal that shapes your final paper (more information below).

Basically, you need to state your title, your question, your theory (what is “cultural trauma?”), your artifacts/primary sources/evidence (as well as how you are collecting and analyzing these) and secondary sources, and your rationale [Why are you researching this topic? What are the limits and opportunities of your approach (including your own constraints and possibilities as the researcher)? Are there any ethical considerations?] Sign-up for presentation at beginning of semester; presentations occur after spring break.

Research Proposal (5 to 10 pages, plus annotated bibliography): Provide your project's title, question, theory (what is “cultural trauma?”), literature review (who has already researched this topic and what have they said about it?), artifacts/primary sources/evidence (as well as how you are collecting and analyzing these) and secondary sources, and rationale [Why are you researching this topic? What are the limits and opportunities of this approach to this topic (including your own constraints and possibilities as the researcher)? Are there any ethical considerations?]. MS Word files of these proposals are due by upload to Canvas by no later than 10 a.m. on Tuesday, March 18. Accepted format = 1” margins, double-spacing, 12-point Times New Roman font, Chicago-style citation.

Final Paper (~20 pages, plus bibliography): Pick an historical event and critique its characterization as a “cultural trauma.” That is, assess whether the notion of a specifically cultural and shared trauma (rather than a psychological and individual trauma) applies and why this kind of characterization of this historical event matters (that is, does it matter that an event is termed “traumatic,” rather than just really, really difficult?).

Your project will have a title, a thesis statement (not a question – here, you are answering your question), an introduction and background/rationale (Why are you researching this topic?) with a literature review (who has already researched this topic

and what have they said about it?), your theory (what is “cultural trauma?”), an outline of artifacts/primary sources/evidence (as well as how you have collected and analyzed these) and secondary sources, an argument connecting theory with evidence, and a conclusion (including reflections on the limits and opportunities of this approach to this topic, including your own constraints and possibilities as the researcher, as well as any ethical considerations). MS Word files of these papers are due by upload to Canvas by no later than 10 a.m. on Monday, May 5. Accepted format = 1” margins, double-spacing, 12-point Times New Roman font, Chicago-style citation.

Academic Integrity

Violations of expected and acceptable academic conduct include [plagiarism](#) (presenting as if it were your own work that you have not yourself conducted), inappropriate collaboration, work done for one course submitted to another, deliberate falsification of data, interference with other students' work, and copyright violations. These violations are all defined within the [University's academic integrity policy](#).

When in doubt regarding appropriate academic conduct, including scholarly citations and other issues, please consult me rather than waiting for a problem to develop.

Resources and Services to Support Student Learning

Penn's [Weingarten Center](#) provides robust resources for academic support and disability services. Please consult with them at your earliest ability to secure the support and services that will enable you to participate fully in this course.

How to Do Well

Be Here: Show up and when you're here, speak up. We clarify and explore assigned material in class, and other students say really interesting things. Lots of learning happens. Plus, actual participation – and not just attendance – is graded, so unless you can shout really loudly from wherever you are when you're absent, you need to be here to join the conversation. For an absence (and the concomitant inability to participate) to be excused, I must be presented in advance with a doctor's note or other equivalent documentation (i.e., NCAA athletic competition, religious observance, family emergency, health concern, etc.). It is your responsibility to check in with a classmate about missed material.

Really Be Here: Turn off the cell phone. Use the laptop for note-taking, referencing course material, and searching the internet for discussion-related information. All other uses take you out of the zen of really *being here*. And they distract/annoy/irritate everyone else, including me.

Be Prepared: Assignments provide you with the basic material you need to learn course concepts. Do your homework, bring all materials (handouts, texts, etc.) to class on the day they are scheduled for discussion, and you will be ready to ask questions, offer answers, and engage with other students in conversation. You will look smart, sound smart, and set yourself up for success.

Meet Deadlines: NO LATE ASSIGNMENTS WILL BE ACCEPTED WITHOUT PRIOR APPROVAL. All assignments are due by no later than the date and time specified on the course calendar. To note again: it's just not cool to stand up or ghost someone! Should you require more time to complete an assignment, you must contact me before the day/time when the assignment is due. Extensions are granted when warranted by appropriate documentation in advance of unavoidable, uncontrollable circumstances (i.e., NCAA athletic competition, religious observance, family emergency, health concern, etc.).

Marks Family Writing Center: While this is not a writing class per se, assignments require you to produce intelligible written arguments and such arguments can become unintelligible (picture me reading your work and thinking, "whaaaaa?") through poor writing style. But there is hope and a remedy! Take advantage of Penn's [Marks Family Writing Center](#).

Check Your Penn Email: You have been given a Penn email account and on occasion I will email you at that account with important information. Check it routinely or make sure that you have the messages from your Penn account forwarded to the account you use most frequently. This is fair warning that you are assumed to have received emailed messages and are therefore responsible for information communicated through your Penn account.

Respect Others: It is important for each student to feel free to contribute to class discussions and exercises. Accordingly, mean-spirited and/or disrespectful remarks made either to me or between students are not tolerated. This is not meant to indicate that you forgo any right to free speech and expression, but I ask that you recognize that everyone else has those rights as well. I ask that you communicate thoughtfully and respectfully with me and with others in the class.

Course Calendar

Week	Meeting Date	Content/ Assignments
		UNIT I: TRAUMA
1 Broad Overview: What Are We Getting Ourselves Into?	Thursday, 1/16	Introduction
2 Psychological Trauma and Its History	Tuesday, 1/21	Herman, Judith. "A Forgotten History." In <i>Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror</i> , 9-47. 4 th ed. New York: Basic Books, 2022. Janoff-Bulman, Ronnie. "Our Fundamental Assumptions." In <i>Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma</i> , 3-25. New York: The Free Press, 1992.
Research and Writing Workshop: The Research Topic	Thursday, 1/23	in-class discussion
3 Elements of Psychological Trauma, Part One	Tuesday, 1/28	Herman, Judith. "Terror." In <i>Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror</i> , 48-73. 4 th ed. New York: Basic Books, 2022. Janoff-Bulman, Ronnie. "Cognitive Conservatism and Resistance to Change." In <i>Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma</i> , 26-45. New York: The Free Press, 1992.
Research and Writing Workshop: The Research Question	Thursday, 1/30	in-class discussion

4 Elements of Psychological Trauma, Part Two	Tuesday, 2/4	<p>Herman, Judith. "Disconnection." In <i>Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror</i>, 74-107. 4th ed. New York: Basic Books, 2022.</p> <p>Janoff-Bulman, Ronnie. "Trauma and the Terror of Our Own Fragility." In <i>Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma</i>, 49-69. New York: The Free Press, 1992.</p> <p>Janoff-Bulman, Ronnie. "Disillusionment and Change in the Assumptive World." In <i>Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma</i>, 70-90. New York: The Free Press, 1992.</p>
Research and Writing Workshop: Refining the Research Question	Thursday, 2/6	in-class discussion
5 Psychological Trauma: Recovery, Part One	Tuesday, 2/11	<p>Herman, Judith. "Safety." In <i>Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror</i>, 223-253. 4th ed. New York: Basic Books, 2022.</p> <p>Herman, Judith. "Remembrance and Mourning." In <i>Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror</i>, 254-285. 4th ed. New York: Basic Books, 2022.</p> <p>Herman, Judith. "Reconnection." In <i>Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror</i>, 286-312. 4th ed. New York: Basic Books, 2022.</p>
Research and Writing Workshop: The Research Method	Thursday, 2/13	in-class discussion

6 Psychological Trauma: Recovery, Part Two	Tuesday, 2/18	<p>Janoff-Bulman, Ronnie. "Processing the Powerful New Data." In <i>Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma</i>, 93-114. New York: The Free Press, 1992.</p> <p>Janoff-Bulman, Ronnie. "Rebuilding Assumptions: Interpreting the Traumatic Experience." In <i>Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma</i>, 115-141. New York: The Free Press, 1992.</p> <p>Janoff-Bulman, Ronnie. "Recovery: Some Final Thoughts." In <i>Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma</i>, 169-175. New York: The Free Press, 1992.</p>
Research and Writing Workshop: The Research Proposal	Thursday, 2/20	in-class discussion
		UNIT 2: TRAUMA AND CULTURE
7 From Psychological to Cultural Trauma	Tuesday, 2/25	<p>DePrince, Anne P. and Jennifer J. Freyd. "The Harm of Trauma: Pathological Fear, Shattered Assumptions, or Betrayal?" In <i>Loss of the Assumptive World: A Theory of Traumatic Loss</i>, edited by Jeffrey Kauffman, 71-82. New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2002.</p> <p>deVries, Marten W. "Trauma in Cultural Perspective." In <i>Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society</i>, edited by Bessel A. van der Kolk, Alexander C. McFarlane, and Lars Weisaeth, 398-413. New York: The Guilford Press, 1996.</p> <p>Lehrner, Amy and Rachel Yehuda. "Cultural Trauma and Epigenetic Inheritance." <i>Development and Psychopathology</i> 30 (2018): 1763-1777. doi:10.1017/S0954579418001153</p>
Research and Writing Workshop: Refining the Research Proposal	Thursday, 2/27	in-class discussion

8 Cultural Trauma Theory	Tuesday, 3/4	Smelser, Neil J. "Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma." In <i>Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity</i> , 31-59. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004.
Research and Writing Workshop: Refining the Research Proposal	Thursday, 3/6	in-class discussion
		SPRING BREAK
9 History and Its Artifacts, Part One	Tuesday, 3/18 due by no later than 10 a.m.	RESEARCH PROPOSAL DUE Williams, Raymond. "The Analysis of Culture." In <i>Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader</i> , edited by John Storey, 32-40. New York: Pearson, 1994. Sturken, Marita. "Introduction." In <i>Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering</i> , 1-17. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997. Sturken, Marita. "Afterword." In <i>Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering</i> , 255-259. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997.
Research and Writing Workshop	Thursday, 3/20	research proposal presentations
10 History and Its Artifacts, Part Two	Tuesday, 3/25	Sturken, Marita. "Reenactment and the Making of History: The Vietnam War as Docudrama." In <i>Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering</i> , 85-121. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997. Landsberg, Alison. "America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory." In <i>Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture</i> , 111-115, 121-129. NY: Columbia University Press, 2004.
Research and Writing Workshop	Thursday, 3/27	research proposal presentations

11 The Researcher	Tuesday, 4/1	Rosaldo, Renato. "Introduction: Grief and a Headhunter's Rage." In <i>Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis</i> , 1-21. 1989. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993.
Research and Writing Workshop	Thursday, 4/3	research proposal presentations
12 First-Hand Accounts	Tuesday, 4/8	Browning, Christopher R. "German Memory, Judicial Interrogation, and Historical Reconstruction: Writing Perpetrator History from Postwar Testimony." In <i>Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution,"</i> edited by Saul Friedlander, 22-36. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.
		Portelli, Alessandro. "Philosophy and the Facts: Subjectivity and Narrative Form in Autobiography and Oral History." In <i>The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue</i> , 79-88. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997.
		Erikson, Kai T. "Collective Trauma: Loss of Communitality." In <i>Everything in Its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood</i> , 186-245. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976.
Research and Writing Workshop	Thursday, 4/10	in-class, walk-in consultation about research proposals
13 Popular Culture Artifacts, Part One	Tuesday, 4/15	Junod, Tom. "The Falling Man." <i>Esquire</i> , 177-183. Sept. 2003.
Research and Writing Workshop	Thursday, 4/17	round table: discussing works-in-progress
14 Popular Culture Artifacts, Part Two	Tuesday, 4/22	Spielberg, Steven, dir. <i>Munich</i> . 2005; Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures.
Research and Writing Workshop	Thursday, 4/24	round table: discussing works-in-progress
15 Fruition	Tuesday, 4/29	in-class, walk-in consultation about final papers

Final Exam Period	Monday, 5/5 due by no later than 10 a.m.	FINAL PAPER DUE