



## SHARON POLLOCK: FIRST WOMAN OF CANADIAN THEATRE Edited by Donna Coates

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## Questions of Collective Responsibility in Sharon Pollock's *Man Out of Joint*

*Tanya Schaap*

*The artist constantly lives in such a state of ambiguity,  
incapable of negating the real and yet eternally bound to  
question it in its eternally unfinished aspects.*

—ALBERT CAMUS, *CREATE DANGEROUSLY*

In *The Political Unconscious*, Marxist literary theorist Fredric Jameson accredits the political interpretation of literary texts “not as some supplementary method . . . but rather as the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation” (17). There is no working distinction for Jameson between political and apolitical literary texts; explicitly or symbolically, all texts operate as doctrines of political consciousness. For Jameson, mysteries of our cultural past “can recover their original urgency for us only if they are retold within the unity of a single great collective story; only if, in however disguised or symbolic a form, they

are seen as sharing a single fundamental theme” (19). In such a context, the process of working through certain historical and cultural events – that is, the demystification, reconsideration, and re-evaluation of events that confound or confuse a social collective – demands a representation of those events within the confines of a single collective narrative form. Based on her extensive body of work over the last forty years that repeatedly engages with the political and the historical, playwright Sharon Pollock must agree.

In many of her plays, such as *Walsh* (1973), which examines the relationship between Sioux Chief Sitting Bull and James Walsh of the North West Mounted Police; *The Komagata Maru Incident* (1976), which dramatizes the plight of 376 British subjects aboard a Japanese steamship denied access into Canada in 1914 due to their Asian descent; *One Tiger to a Hill* (1980), which dramatizes a 1975 hostage taking at a British Columbian prison; *Fair Liberty’s Call* (1993), which recounts the story of a Loyalist family in 1785 fleeing from Boston to New Brunswick during the American Revolution; and most recently *Man Out of Joint* (2007), a drama that examines the controversy over 9/11 conspiracy theories and the prisoner abuse at Guantanamo Bay, Pollock consistently weaves the political consciousness of a particular historical moment into a single great collective story. As theatre critic Jeff Kubik asserts, Pollock is an “agitator in her own right,” politically, socially, and artistically engaged with the notorious, the controversial, and the politically charged (n.p.).

In *Man Out of Joint*, Pollock chronicles the detainee abuse at Guantanamo Bay as well as the controversies surrounding 9/11 conspiracy theories, which are based on the case of Delmart Vreeland, a man who claims to have warned the Canadian embassy of possible attacks on New York City and the Pentagon. Pollock stages aspects of the torture and abuse as a kind of framework, or emblematic context, for the central story line of the play’s protagonist, Toronto lawyer Joel Gianelli, a character based on Rocco Galati, Vreeland’s real-life lawyer. Pollock is careful, however, to pay attention to the ways in which these events should be represented, not as mere subject matter, or as

a retracing of the events as they happened, but rather as narratives that go beyond simple storytelling, and which raise questions regarding collective responsibility and cultural memory. In an interview with Kubik, Pollock states, “I don’t want to write a tract, I want to tell a story . . . And inherent in the story some questions arise, and to me that’s politics in theatre. I’m not interested in those opinion pieces, which tend to be more about the person writing the piece than the opinion, so I can’t imagine doing anything except theatre in terms of that politic” (Kubik n.p.). In *Man Out of Joint*, Pollock seeks to expand audience awareness by directing their attention to the experience of various victims, witnesses, bystanders, and perpetrators in the aftermath of the attacks on 11 September 2001, and the years of reported abuse at Guantanamo Bay that followed. On the surface, *Man Out of Joint* functions as an artistic representation of the disturbing and controversial incidents at Guantanamo Bay. On a deeper level, however, the play challenges audiences to question their collective responsibility to incidents such as (but not limited to) the torture and abuse of detainees at Guantanamo Bay. I am concerned here with the ways in which *Man Out of Joint* invites audience members to contemplate their collective response in the context of historically painful and culturally discomfiting incidents such as public reports of the detainee abuse at Guantanamo Bay. This essay will examine the play through a theory of trauma – specifically, the ways in which Pollock’s play operates as a trauma narrative. A consideration of *Man Out of Joint* in this context allows for a serious reflection on the ways in which Pollock aims to awaken and provoke our collective memory of such incidents. In staging these disturbing events, Pollock strives to bear witness to those that suffer, to avert the process of social indifference, and to persuade audiences to consider their own culpability.

As Donna Coates explains, *Man Out of Joint* stemmed from Pollock’s intense interest in the reports of detainee abuse at Guantanamo Bay that were released by the American Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR), and which eventually led her to the lawyer for the Toronto terror suspects, Rocco Galati (254). Much of

the play's dialogue is taken from actual conversations with detainees in the CCR report (Kubik n.p.). In this way, Pollock's play might be read as docudrama or verbatim theatre, theatre that takes as its subject matter actual historical events, often transcribed word for word from archival documents. Contemporary theatre critics Will Hammond and Dan Steward explain that in verbatim theatre, the playwright takes the words of real people as they are recorded in an interview or archival document, and edits, arranges, and recontextualizes them for dramatic presentation (9). For Pollock, this meant resourcing the actual reports from the detainment of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay (specifically the case of Omar Khadr, the fifteen-year-old Canadian detainee charged with murdering American combat medic Christopher Speer in Afghanistan in 2002), as well as the documented interviews with Toronto lawyer, Rocco Galati, on whom the lead character Joel is based.<sup>1</sup> According to Hammond and Steward, there is a claim in verbatim theatre for veracity and authenticity: "When this claim is made, theatre and journalism overlap . . . we turn to verbatim theatre because we feel that it is somehow better suited to the task of dealing with serious subject matter" (10–11). Pollock reminds us that it is never her intention to create biography, docudrama, or documentary: "I think of biography as an aspect of my research, a means to some other end in which the life and times provides bits or chunks of raw material" ("Playwright" 297). The verbatim method allows Pollock to use the documentary material as a springboard from which to explore the larger political and cultural dilemmas, while still remaining tethered to the actual events around which the play is written.

I raise these issues of genre and classification to suggest that *Man Out of Joint* is docudrama, or verbatim theatre, but with a difference. Not only does Pollock draw from actual reports regarding detainee abuse at Guantanamo Bay, she also includes highly contested, controversial information relating to 9/11 conspiracy theories. Throughout the play, Joel continually questions the legitimacy of certain 9/11 reports that have come to his attention through his dealings with his client, Ed Leland. After Joel interviews Ed, the stage directions read:

*Sound of a click. "QUESTIONS SURROUNDING 9/11 (www.whatreallyhappened.com)" bleed up on the cyc. They roll fairly quickly, are not intended to be read. They might begin with "Did Delmart Vreeland warn Canadian Intelligence in August 2001 about possible terrorist attacks on New York and the Pentagon?" (283)*

Pollock deliberately blends real names and news stories into the fiction of her play in order to blur the distinction between truth and fiction. The "facts" of this play, with regards to existing 9/11 conspiracy theories, may be fiction; the actual information she uses in the play is both real and imaginary, depending on whom you talk to, and depending on whom you believe. In using verbatim techniques in a play of this sort, which takes as its principal subject matter a topic that is not only highly controversial but also highly contested for its truthfulness, Pollock raises more questions than she answers, which is, I would argue, her overriding intention.

In *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, Laurie Vickroy explores the ways in which contemporary fiction narratives represent trauma, defined in her words as "a response to events so overwhelmingly intense that they impair normal emotional and cognitive responses and bring lasting psychological disruption" (ix). For the abused and tortured detainees, their experiences at Guantanamo Bay were psychologically and physically traumatic. As sociologist Sherene Razack explains,

Shortly after 9/11, men and some children rounded up from the villages and battlefields of Afghanistan were herded into shipping containers . . . Many died . . . Those who survived typically were taken to prisons at Bagram and Kandahar, Afghanistan . . . or to the U.S. base at Guantanamo, Cuba, where they were detained on the basis that the president, as the commander-in-chief, possessed the unilateral authority to arrest and detain anyone. Detainees

were declared “enemy combatants,” a designation that left them in a no man’s land of rights, neither prisoners of war nor criminals. (29)

Convicted of no crime, many of the detainees were detained with an “unquestioned absence of evidence,” on the basis that they were “‘Islamic terrorists,’ men who come from a culture in which religion, not rationality, produces individuals with an *inherent* capacity for violence” (Razak 29). The CCR reports “accounts of torture and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment,” based upon detainee statements, public unclassified sources, and government documents released through a Freedom of Information Act (CCR 2) request.

In June 2008, CBC News published an interview between the Associated Press and Dr. Allen Keller, one of the doctors who conducted medical and psychological tests on some of the (now-released) detainees at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. Keller claims: “We found clear physical and psychological evidence of torture and abuse, often causing lasting suffering” (“Guantanamo”). He goes on to report that “the treatment the detainees reported were ‘eerily familiar’ to stories from other torture survivors around the world. He said the sexual humiliation of the prisoners was often the most traumatic experience.” The medical and psychological evidence obtained through examinations of the detainees, most of whom have since been released, suggest that due to the intensive abuse and torture to which they were subjected, many of these individuals suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Thus, Pollock’s staging of the abuse experienced at Guantanamo Bay in *Man Out of Joint*, which draws attention both literally (through the re-enactment of the abuse) and symbolically (through the use of sound, light, and props) to the abuse of power that occurred at the Cuban prison, can be classified as a trauma narrative. Within the context of trauma theory, we might consider the various ways in which Pollock’s play effectively functions as trauma fiction, that is, as Vickroy puts it, how it “poses a number of thought-provoking questions and

dilemmas for writers and readers, ranging from the potentially ethical function of literature [or in this case, theatre], to reconsidering our cultural assumptions about identity, relationality, and intentionality” (ix). Not only does Pollock’s play personalize the experience of detainees at Guantanamo Bay, and in so doing invite audiences to embrace a more meaningful connection with victims, but it also challenges dominant ideologies and certain socio-political assumptions that may have led to the abuse of power.

Through the use of sound, “*a loud cacophony of disorienting music and sound,*” the onstage presence of hooded, shackled detainees in those now-identifiable orange jumpsuits, strobe lights, brief blasts of sound, and a voice-over asserting: “This place is a place beyond the law . . . In this place, we are the law,” Pollock begins by positioning her play within a disorienting context of torture and abuse (259–60). This stylistic approach corresponds with the implicit aesthetic of trauma narratives. As trauma theorist Roger Luckhurst suggests, “Because a traumatic event confounds narrative knowledge, the . . . narrative form . . . must acknowledge this in different kinds of temporal disruption. . . . Disorders of emplotment are read as mimicking the traumatic effect” (88). In other words, trauma narratives defy logical, progressive, conventional narrative technique. Instead, they embrace avant-garde and experimental techniques in their attempt to mimic or mirror the effects of trauma; as a trauma narrative, the play exposes and illuminates the traumatic experience of the victims of torture and abuse at Guantanamo Bay through artistic inventiveness and non-linear narrative sequencing. In order to mirror the disorienting psychological takeover of the detainees, Pollock abandons conventional storytelling, and disorients her audience by mimicking the uncertain rhythms and processes of traumatic experience.

This technique of disorientation or rhythm of uncertainty, as I paradoxically call it, is woven throughout the play even while the chief narrative thread, the story of Joel Gianelli, and the most conventional part of the play, is developed. Examples of this rhythm of uncertainty include the voice of “K,” described in the list of characters as “*a voice-over*



with power and formality,” who continually interrupts and disrupts dialogue between characters; Scrolls of Bill C-36, the Anti-Terrorism Act, which appear periodically up on the CYC; murmuring voices, incoherent dialogue, and disorienting sounds in the background; the ghost-like presence of Joel’s deceased father, Dominic Gianelli, who often makes an appearance in the middle of conversations between principal characters; soldiers who appear in the background assaulting the detainees; and the dissociative aspect of Joel’s character, who often appears onstage as “Joe,” played by a different actor. In the staging notes, directors are told that all the characters, whether or not they are directly involved in the scene, “are always present, perhaps in shadows or ‘out of focus’ although they remain engaged by what transpires and may subtly react to it” (258). In other words, there is a sense of interconnectedness between all that goes on in the play in spite of the multiple “storylines” operating independently. On their own, some of these disorienting techniques, such as the presence of a ghost (Dominic) and the twinning or splitting of Joe/Joel’s character, render *Man Out of Joint* a paradigmatic trauma narrative. Taken together, however, these aspects point to a definitive rhythm of uncertainty in the play, what Luckhurst calls the “disarticulation of linear narrative” (91) and what Toni Morrison describes as “compelling confusion,” a narrative technique she employs in her novel, *Beloved*, a paradigmatic trauma narrative (qtd. in Luckhurst 90).

While the principal trauma in question, and the one by which Pollock seems most disturbed, is the torture and abuse of detainees at Guantanamo Bay, other traumatic (or at least psychologically and emotionally disturbing) incidents are layered throughout the play. Through the development of the character Dominic, for example, Pollock illuminates the (often-unheard-of) internment of Italians in Canada in the 1940s, in which over 600 Italian-Canadians were interned across the country as soon as Mussolini joined forces with Nazi Germany. As Dominic says: “‘Defence of Canada Regulations,’ that is how they can do it. The Ottawa man, the big one. June 1940. Before he opens his mouth, we are citizens. He speaks a few words. He closes his mouth.

Now we are enemy alien” (288). Dominic recalls how, in a matter of moments and with only a few government-sanctioned declarations, his entire identity shifts. Pollock is, of course, drawing a parallel between the abuse of power at Guantanamo Bay and the prejudice, discriminatory actions and declarations of the Canadian government during World War II; Canadians are also guilty of abuse and bigotry. She is also creating a conjunction between those victimized by socio-political biases and intense abuses of authority. A more subtle parallel, however, could involve her questions around collective responsibility and social responses. We might ask, how did Canadians respond to the Italian (not to mention the Japanese) internment during World War II? Does this part of Canadian history remain a dark secret? In the same context, how have we responded to the torture and abuse of detainees at Guantanamo Bay or Abu Ghraib? Should we stick our heads in the sand and hope it will all just fade away? Or should we speak up, act, object, and protest? Incidentally, to encourage audience members to write their government representatives about the issue, the playbill for *Man Out of Joint* provided names and contact information for local members of parliament.

Another example of psychological or emotional anguish that plays a large role in the play is the drowning death of Joel’s three-year-old son, Spencer. Joel accuses his wife, Suzanne, of standing idly by when Spencer falls in the river after chasing their dog down to the water. Instead of jumping in to rescue him, Suzanne does nothing: “I’m sorry,” says Suzanne. “I should have done this and done that and this and the other, I should have done something, I know that. But I didn’t. I just froze and I’m sorry” (295). In this same scene, Pollock intermingles multiple stories or “traumas,” one on top of the other, without pause or interruption: Dominic interrupts to recall an instance of bigotry and prejudice by a woman on the street directed toward him and a three-year-old Joel; Suzanne recalls with anguish her inability to jump in after Spencer; and Joel becomes distracted and begins describing waterboarding, “interrogation technique, number six,” a torture tactic which simulates drowning by holding down the victim, covering his

mouth with a towel, and pouring water in his mouth until panic sets in. In using this technique of layering multiple emotionally disturbing stories upon each other, Pollock is engaging in what Luckhurst might describe as a “disorder of emplotment.” This technique enables Pollock to mimic or mirror the effects of trauma, the confounding, confusing, and disorienting consequences of a psychological wound so intense it overwhelms the normal processes of memory and identity. In so doing, Pollock invites the audience to connect on some level with the experience of the traumatized; by layering multiple narratives upon each other, Pollock reminds us that these experiences are not limited to one particular time or place (Coates 254).

As Vickroy suggests, one of the principal aims of trauma narratives is to thwart societal disregard for painful, uncomfortable, often-controversial historical events: “they enact the directing outward of an inward, silent process to other witnesses, both within and outside the texts. Such reconstruction is also directed toward readers, engaging them in a meditation on individual distress, collective responsibilities, and communal healing in relation to trauma” (3). According to Vickroy’s model, trauma narratives accomplish two things: they publicly reconstruct the private, psychological experience of the traumatized individual, directing readers (or in this case audiences) into a sobering contemplative examination of the individual, psychological suffering of witnesses/victims; and they invite the public (readers/audiences) to reflect upon their own collective responsibility with regards to the trauma at hand. According to Vickroy, trauma narratives raise “important questions about the value of cultural representations of trauma and if they provide simplistic solutions or easy consolations. Truthful trauma narratives avoid this by often critiquing oppressive forces” (xiii). I use Vickroy’s model here to emphasize that it is precisely the aim of trauma narratives to ask questions, to avoid simplistic solutions, and to refuse to provide consolatory answers.

Within this context, *Man Out of Joint* further qualifies as a trauma narrative: first, as we have already seen, through the reconstruction of the traumatic experience of Guantanamo Bay detainees and

the disorienting rhythm of the play; and second, by not yielding to the temptation to provide easy answers or simple explanations for these particular events. Instead, Pollock uses the play as a platform to counter or challenge the abuse of power, and to question the public's response to political interpretations and assessments of such incidents. According to Vickroy, effective trauma narratives, which are often centred on traumatic situations imposed by human beings in positions of power, provide "implicit critiques of the ways social, economic, and political structures can create and perpetuate trauma" (4). In other words, narratives that deal in some way with the testimony or experiences of those victimized by oppressive human forces challenge audiences/readers to question the socio-political aspects of such incidents, and force them to evaluate their own reaction to the abuse(s) of power. Instead of screening the public from traumatic events, such as the abuse at Guantanamo Bay, and in so doing, distancing the public from having to evaluate their response to the abuse, plays such as *Man Out of Joint* aim to bring the public close, intentionally staging an uncomfortable and disturbing environment from which they are forced to consider their own response to issues such as government-endorsed abuse and torture.

Through the development of the characters Joel, Suzanne, and Joel's law partner Erin, none of whom are directly involved in the torture or abuse at Guantanamo Bay, Pollock invites audiences to reflect upon their own collective responsibility with regards to these issues. As neither perpetrators nor victims of the torture and abuse, these three characters offer Pollock a vantage point from which to consider the public's role and response to such atrocities. These characters represent a continuum of responses to political, social, and ethical dilemmas; Pollock presents audiences with a representational trajectory of responses here to question dominant political, social and cultural ideologies, and to question the politics of cultural memory and the public understanding of controversy. In support of this theory, Pollock articulates her motivation for writing the play as follows:

Really, I don't think it's important what I believe . . . I didn't write the play to get [those ideas] out there. If you are confronted with that kind of information, which may or may not be valid, do you take a path of willful ignorance, or what is an appropriate action? That to me is the dilemma . . . Do we indulge in a willful ignorance, or are we compelled to say, "I'm going to do something about it?" (Kubik n.p.)

Pollock's goal is not to provide an opinion or explanation that will serve to justify or condemn historical acts of violence and abuse. Rather, Pollock is concerned here with collective responses and actions to such atrocities.

On the continuum of social responses, Joel represents agency, or action. He is, as his law partner Erin suggests, not afraid to "open this can of worms" (278). Despite his initial reluctance, Joel buries himself deeper and deeper into the unpopular case of Ed Leland. Erin questions his pursuit as follows:

ERIN: You're getting a reputation, Joel.

JOEL: So we should throw these "unpopular defendants" to the wall, is that it?

ERIN: That's not what I'm saying.

JOEL: So what are you saying?

. . .

ERIN: . . . But you'll be targeted and I'll be targeted.

JOEL: When did that start to concern you?

ERIN: I'm saying things have changed since 9/11 and I just don't think we want our names on a list.

JOEL: That's not like you.

ERIN: Yeah, well proximity to you has given me a touch of paranoia. (271–72)

While Erin is not in complete opposition to Joel, she does represent something of a “middle-of-the-road” response; she represents neither action nor inaction, but instead adopts a self-protective posture. She tells Joel that he is “taking on too many of these terrorist detainee cases,” that he should just “forget Guantanamo North,” and leave “Omar Khadr and Gitmo to the Yankees” (267). Erin might have good intentions, but she remains inactive, concerned more about personal consequences than social justice. When Joel asks if she is running out on him, she responds, “Not running, but I am walking” (273). Adopting a stance of indifference, Erin represents collective apathy or cultural complacency – a quiet, passive social response to events such as the abuse at Guantanamo Bay; these are individuals who may know the facts, offer a mildly antipathetic response, but who ultimately choose to walk away, too concerned about potential repercussions if they were to act or respond in any broad or bold way. Erin, like so many others, is not content with abandoning these controversial issues entirely, yet she is also too afraid to speak up.

In contrast to Joel (at one end) and Erin (somewhere in the middle), Suzanne represents the other end of the spectrum in terms of social response and collective memory. From the beginning of the play, the stage directions focus our attention on Suzanne’s alienation from Joel: “*Suzanne is isolated literally and metaphorically from Joel*” (261). Joel and Suzanne’s relationship throughout the play remains suspended, on the edge of total collapse, stunted after the drowning death of Spencer a year prior. Unlike Joel, who becomes increasingly obsessed with finding answers to the perplexities around him (9/11 conspiracy theories, the torture and abuse of detainees, the death of his son), Suzanne is inclined to avoid these issues entirely, and uses humour, anger, or ignorance to colour her response. Responding to Joel’s explanation of one of the torture tactics used at Guantanamo called “Long

Time Standing,” a term used by the CIA to describe one of the “alternative methods” of interrogation, Suzanne appears uninterested:

SUZANNE: What’re you reading that’s possibly more important than us?

JOEL: (*reads from the file*) “Long Time Standing.”

SUZANNE: (*smiles finding the term a bit funny*) “Long Time Standing?”

JOEL: Do you know what that is?

SUZANNE: A Japanese print of a crane on one leg?

JOEL: (*reads*) “Enhanced Interrogation Techniques. Number four: Long Time Standing: Forced to stand, handcuffed, feet shackled to an eyebolt in the floor for excess of forty hours. Exhaustion and sleep deprivation is effective in yielding results.”

SUZANNE: I think I prefer my Japanese print.  
(288–89)

Suzanne “doesn’t care to dwell on that kind of thing”; she doesn’t want to “talk about this”; she “doesn’t feel anything”; it’s “not our problem,” she says (289–90). When accused of being uninterested in things that matter, Suzanne responds: “Does that make me a bad person? Because I don’t care to dwell on the kind of thing that you’re reading?” (289). Furthermore, Pollock characterizes Suzanne as prejudiced and discriminatory; when Joel explains that one of the detainees is a Canadian boy (Omar Khadr), Suzanne responds, “First of all, he’s not Canadian, he’s Muslim” (289). Taken together, all of these examples depict Suzanne as an individual content with living her own life, protected from the atrocities that occur in the world, and ignorant of – or unconcerned with – how to respond appropriately.

Similar to Erin, although more active in her avoidance of controversy, Suzanne can be read as representational of a collective response, that is, social ignorance, socio-political biases, and an evasion of cultural atrocities and controversies. Suzanne's avoidance of the issues so central to Joel is tragically and symbolically echoed in her role in Spencer's death. When discussing Spencer's drowning, Joel makes it clear that he holds Suzanne responsible, which he describes as follows:

[Spencer] turns and he trips and he falls. Into the water, not – a fucking disaster, if maybe, you'd run, maybe you'd – jumped – into the water – maybe you'd grabbed him – maybe you'd, you'd saved him – maybe you'd done some fucking thing instead of standing there like a statue, like a, like a – if you'd done something, anything, done anything except stand there and watch. Watch while the river took Spencie away. You stupid . . . nothing. Just – nothing. (296)

Suzanne's failure to save her son from drowning is emblematic of her lack of interest or critical concern over the human suffering and exploitation of power that occurred at Guantanamo Bay. There is an implicit, yet distinct, parallel between Suzanne's failure to save Spencer and her refusal to become emotionally or intellectually invested in the complex cultural and political dilemmas that haunt Joel. In characterizing Suzanne as complacent, ignorant, and apathetic, Pollock holds a mirror up to audiences, and invites them to consider existing collective behaviour that demonstrates prejudice, ignorance, or avoidance of human suffering caused by oppressive forces. Incidentally, at the end of the play, Pollock depicts both Erin and Suzanne reading: "*ERIN begins by picking up paper but is caught by information on one and starts to read. SUZANNE draws closer. She too starts to pick up and read documents*" (319). This reflects Pollock's optimism, that despite previous behaviour, we can and will pay attention once awakened from complacency.



Does the character of Suzanne in *Man Out of Joint* model the “innocent” tourist of history – one who is more comfortable evading issues of trauma, avoiding the suffering of others, and misreading cultural crises? In *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero*, Marita Sturken examines how certain practices and tendencies in American culture (often media-generated) relate to a national tendency to see the United States as somehow detached from and un-implicated in the troubled global strife of the world (4). She takes aim at the American public as *tourists of history* and questions those aspects of American culture, such as consumerism and media-induced paranoia, which encourage such a posture. She writes, “the tourist is a figure who embodies a detached and seemingly innocent pose. In using the term ‘tourists of history’ I am defining a particular mode through which the American public is encouraged to experience itself as the subject of history through consumerism, media images, souvenirs, popular culture” (9). She goes on to explain that “tourism is about travel that wants to imagine itself as innocent; a tourist is someone who stands outside of a culture, looking at it from a position that demands no responsibility” (13). She examines how the practices of tourism and consumerism “both allow for certain kinds of individual engagement with traumatic experience yet, at the same time, foreclose on other possible ways of understanding national politics and political engagement” (13). Does Suzanne’s apathetic disposition epitomize this narrative of innocence, a narrative so important, as Sturken claims, to the US national identity throughout much of American history? (15) Just as the tourist stands innocently outside of the culture she finds herself in, Suzanne continually repositions herself outside of Joel’s principal humanitarian concerns. Unlike Erin, who represents complacency, Suzanne represents detachment, privilege, status, and ignorance. She is someone capable of reshaping the truth to suit personal need or desire; she even changes Joel’s name to suit her own desires:

SUZANNE: . . . We were introduced and I swear I heard “Joel” and it was months before you corrected me. By then it was too late.

JOEL: You heard a name you preferred.

SUZANNE: Preference had nothing to do with it. I heard Joel, I called you Joel, you answered to Joel and now you are Joel. (292)

Suzanne is content, without apology or justification, to reshape history as she desires, disregarding the truth to suit a personal preference. Perhaps Pollock is drawing a parallel here to the collective reaction to cultural tragedy and atrocity.

In presenting these three characters as a trajectory of social responses, with Joel at one end as action, Suzanne at the other end as detachment, and Erin somewhere in the middle as complacency, Pollock encourages her audience to identify with one or perhaps more of these characters. In *Man Out of Joint*, Pollock respects both the complexity of the issues at hand and the myriad of collective and social responses that can, and often do, occur. In so doing, she invites audiences to reconsider their own cultural assumptions, and to encourage what Vickroy describes as “a necessary public understanding of complex psychosocial quandaries that continue to haunt us all” (xvi).

To this end, *Man Out of Joint* becomes a working model of what theorist and historian Dominick LaCapra calls “empathic unsettlement.” LaCapra argues that the role of empathy is critical toward authentic historical understanding, and that a “working through” of trauma involves the articulation and representation of that experience (42). He asserts,

Being responsive to the traumatic experience of others, notably of victims, implies not the appropriation of their experience but what I would call empathic unsettlement, which should have stylistic effects or, more broadly, effects

in writing which cannot be reduced to formulas or rules of method. (41)

LaCapra cautions us against over-identification with victims and argues instead for empathetic reactions triggered through the representation of unsettling narratives. He explains that these unsettling representations often appear in disarticulate, unconventional narrative form, a claim echoed by Luckhurst and Vickroy, as outlined earlier. Empathic unsettling allows others to associate, and yet not over-identify, with a victim's experience, and thus "poses a barrier to closure in discourse" (40–41). As LaCapra explains, the role of empathy and empathic unsettling creates attentive secondary witnesses. He writes that "opening oneself to empathic unsettling is . . . a desirable affective dimension of inquiry" (78). Empathic unsettling thus creates thoughtful, conscientious responses to trauma, and at the same time, prevents us from adopting easy answers, simple solutions, and sentimental sympathies toward human suffering. Vickroy agrees, suggesting that trauma narratives try to make readers "experience emotional intimacy and immediacy, individual voices and memories, and the sensory responses of the characters" (xvi). When they succeed, she argues, they function as important contributions to a necessary public consideration of trauma, and they "elucidate the dilemma of the public's relationship to the traumatized, made problematic by victims' painful experiences and psychic defenses that can alienate others, and by the public's resistance" (2). In other words, trauma narratives such as *Man Out of Joint* work to arouse public empathy toward the victims of trauma, which in this case includes (but is not limited to) the victims of abuse at Guantanamo Bay. In so doing, they open up a space for identification and emotional intimacy between the traumatized and others, a space often closed due to fear, ignorance, and resistance.

A number of obstacles plague the artist who engages with history, especially controversial and contested "history." We might ask, what is the relationship between history and art, between "truth" and fiction, between the real and the imagined? How does the artist locate a

space of interrogation or contemplation within the problematic space of represented history, perhaps especially when this history is difficult, unsettling, and controversial? In other words, how does the artist work to condense the levels of representation when dealing with real, historical events? In a keynote address in 2004, Pollock provides an answer when she compares herself to the demon-possessed child in the 1973 horror film, *The Exorcist*:

Whenever I sit down to draw my thoughts together for an address like this . . . an image comes to me. It's from *The Exorcist*. The priest is sitting by the bedside table of the physically transformed and possessed child. The priest asks, "Who are you?" A deep frightening voice answers, "I am legion."

Well, I am legion. I am many competing thoughts and voices, and No Theories . . . I open my mouth and speak. Before the sentence, phrase, or word is out, internally I'm hearing three or four conflicting statements: "This can't be right"; "True today, what about tomorrow?"; "What a load of crap." And "Oh, shut up!" . . . I know it's impossible to find out *what is*, *what isn't*, and *why* but that in no way diminishes my desire or need to continue the search. (Pollock "Playwright" 295)

In many ways, the analogy between the demon-possessed child and the writer encapsulates a *postmodern* challenge; as Linda Hutcheon explains, "Postmodern fiction suggests that to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, [and] to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological" (110). But while an artist like Pollock may surrender to the impossibility of knowing anything with certainty, the "conclusive," the "teleological", the "*what is*, *what isn't* and *why*," she does not necessarily abandon her desire to ask these questions. As Albert Camus suggests

in a speech from 1957: “Remaining aloof has always been possible in history. When someone did not approve, he could always keep silent or talk of something else. Today everything is changed and even silence has dangerous implications. The moment that abstaining from choice is itself looked upon as a choice and punished or praised, the artist is willy-nilly impressed into service” (249). Indeed, narrative representation of difficult, discomfiting history has the capacity to become an agent of change not in its ability to provide answers, but in the subjective way it asks questions, assesses possibilities, and contemplates potentials.

#### NOTE

- 1 After spending almost a decade imprisoned at the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, labelled an “illegal enemy combatant” by the US government, Khadr pleaded guilty to murder, attempted murder, spying, conspiracy, and material support for terrorism. In September 2012, he was extradited to Canada; the terms of his plea deal allow him to serve out the majority of his eight-year sentence in a Canadian security facility. He is currently serving his sentence at a medium-security penitentiary north of Calgary, Alberta.

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