

IS THIS A CULTURE OF TRAUMA? AN INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE

Jessica Aliaga Lavrijsen and Michael Bick, eds.

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(by Juanjo Bermúdez de Castro. Universidad Autónoma de Madrid)

juanjobermudezdecastro@gmail.com

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Since the late 1980s the interest in what we call Trauma Studies has increased exponentially. Although it originated in the context of research on the Holocaust (Kaplan 2005: 1), it has developed from being an isolated branch of psychology to becoming an extraordinarily useful tool for critical analysis in the humanities. The collection of essays included in *Is this a Culture of Trauma? An Interdisciplinary Perspective* offer us a complete and insightful vision of the latest trends related to the study of trauma under very different perspectives.

In March 2012 researchers and professionals from more than a dozen countries met in Prague at the 2nd Global Conference on Trauma, “Trauma: Theory and Practice”. The event was organized by reputed film critic and academic Dr. Colette Balmain and Inter-disciplinary.net program founder and director Dr. Rob Fisher. Inter-disciplinary.net, which is responsible for this volume, is a global network that encourages dynamic research and publishing. The conference was a great success because it gave scholars from different fields the opportunity to present their particular research work on trauma. *Is this a Culture of Trauma?* gives proof of these different but complementary approaches by presenting the reader with a myriad of research lines that are currently active and intrinsically linked to Trauma Studies. Zaragoza University lecturer Dr. Jessica Aliaga Lavrijsen and Salem University researcher Michael Bick —both of them engaged participants at the conference— are the editors of this collection of the best research papers that were presented at the conference.

The structure of *Is this a Culture of Trauma?* is very similar to the conference's panels: twenty-five research articles assembled in seven different thematic units: Individual Trauma (Case Studies and Memoirs), Collective Trauma (History and Nation), Postcolonial Trauma, War Trauma and Genocide, Trauma in Film, Healing Trauma and Theorising Trauma. However, this organization into themes is not pigeonholing at all. As suggested in the Introduction to the volume, there are recurrent topics that appear throughout the book in different sections, such as the possibility or impossibility of an adequate representation of trauma, or the literary lens usually adopted when approaching trauma.

Another element that runs through the entire volume is the constant reference in most contributions to the same great key trauma theorists. This provides abundant evidence of the multiple possibilities of Trauma Studies as a critical tool, since this common theoretical background is embraced to approach sometimes divergent research interests. Among the most recurrently mentioned authors and works we find Kaplan's *Trauma Culture* (2005), LaCapra's *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Laub's "Art and Trauma" (1997), and Whitehead's *Trauma Fiction* (2004), indeed the "Founding Mothers" —with the exception of Dominic LaCapra and Dori Laub, they all are women— of Trauma Studies.¹ The use that the contributors to the volume —many of them young researchers— make of these referential authors is excellent. It shows that Trauma Studies are sufficiently multidisciplinary and versatile to broach a range of topics as broad as that found in the volume. The interdisciplinary character of *Is this a Culture of Trauma?* is certainly one of its biggest assets.

The book is not exempt from contradictions, which is as it should be, because these contradictions are intrinsic to the concept of trauma itself. As Susan Sontag proclaimed, "Photographs of an atrocity may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge" (2003: 11). One of these contradictions very much present in the book is when some essays argue in favor of voicing trauma and the need for language to express it in order to finally overcome it if possible. Hayden White already reflected on this question when he observed in terms borrowed from Sartre's *Nausea* that "Life or reality as lived is inherently chaotic or meaningless, and it is transformed retrospectively into a meaningful story only when told in a narrative" (in LaCapra 2001: 17). We can see this line of thought for example in Filiz Çelik's contribution about the interviews of the Dersim Massacre victims' children and grandchildren, in which a "conspiracy of silence" has left the trauma unresolved since 1937-38.² "Keeping silent about trauma is a major mechanism of its transmission", Çelik points out in his article (2013: 71). This same argumentation is followed by Catherine Ann Collins in her essay about

‘the disappeared’ in Pinochet’s Chile, in which poetry is put forward as a way of giving those who have been silenced their voice back. Of great interest too is Collins’ denunciation of the ways in which collective memory contrives to pass off as normal the indifference to the plight of others that allowed Pinochet’s crimes to take place. This line of reasoning is the same as that already underlined by Sontag when she remarked that “Remembering is an ethical act” (2003: 115). On the other hand, other essays included in the volume defend the inability of language to express and resolve trauma. For example, both Emily Dickinson and Wilfred Bradford assert in their respective essays that the body, rather than language, is more representative of and connected to traumatic experience. The need for language to express trauma and its paradoxical inability to do so are broached by other contributors. Aliaga Lavrijesen, in her essay on female Scottish trauma fiction, shows for example how Janice Galloway in *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* (1989) makes use of graphical modes such as incomplete sentences, notes in the margins, and other postmodern experimental techniques to represent the narrator’s trauma. Ewald Mengel, in his piece about trauma and art in contemporary South African fiction, highlights the important role of non-discursive art forms such as painting, music, sculpting and quilting to represent trauma in South African trauma novels. Following this same approach, Evgenia Troshikhina extols in his contribution the benefits of sandplay therapy for the healing of trauma.

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Another relevant motif that runs through the whole volume is “repetition” in different guises: intergenerational trauma transmission when children who were victims of abuse become abuse perpetrators when adults, as in those case studies analyzed by Dorota Dyjakon, Agnieszka Widera-Wysoczanska, Christian Perring and Clara Mucci; re-enacting trauma as the only way to survive, as posited by Aparajita Nanda; reappearance of trauma in the form of mythical and traditional stories that indirectly make trauma repeat itself until it is confronted head on, which is wonderfully explored by Patricia San José Rico; the cyclical repetitive nature of national and gender trauma, as explained by Michael Bick when analyzing Patricia Powell’s novel *The Pagoda*; the important role of performance and the replication of the experience in trauma therapy, as explored by Oliver and Peter Bray; and the small community courts of reconciliation in Rwanda as an alternative judicial system to promote trauma recovery, as analyzed by Moara Crivelente.

Trauma theorist Judith Herman, in her groundbreaking work *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Violence to Political Terror* (1992), approached individual trauma in a broader political frame by exploring the parallels between private and public terrors as no one else had done before. This inherent relationship between individual and collective trauma is also a constant in *Is this a Culture of Trauma?* For example, Bálint Urbán, in his analysis of José Eduardo Agualusa’s *The Book of*

Chameleons, shows how one of the female protagonists literally carries the wounds of Angolan history on her body in the form of scars inflicted in the civil war. Indeed, these scars link individual body trauma —once again, a non-linguistic representation— to the national history of post-colonial Angola. Bridget Haylock, in her exploration of Australian colonial writer Barbara Baynton’s novel *Human Toll* (1907), also approaches the traumatic inheritance of female embodiment, which is signified by the “colonised female body”, to quote Haylock (2013: 194). Both Aliaga Lavrijsen’s and Bick’s contributions point to this same intersection of individual trauma, postcolonial history and the female body. Finally, Magda R. Atieh and Ghada Mohammad address how trauma in non-combatant women is represented in Middle Eastern and African literatures by rewriting the traditional definition of victimhood.

While a conclusion to the collection of essays in *Is this a Culture of Trauma?* would have given the work a brilliant closure —the volume ends with the last contribution—, the editors give some clues in the book’s introduction regarding the current dangers of this explosion of trauma research work. As Kaplan already noted, to approach everything as traumatic or at least potentially traumatic would lead to the “fossilisation of the concept” (2005: 25). Indeed, as Aliaga herself remarks, “Seeing trauma everywhere contradicts the very uniqueness and ineffability of the traumatic event” (2013: x). In order to avoid this generalizing trend, the editors suggest that Trauma Studies should be used as a critical tool rather than as a label to be attached to everything. What is beyond doubt however is that this collection of essays gives full evidence of the multiple possibilities of using trauma theory as an analytical instrument applicable to very different fields.

Notes

¹. Although these authors are undoubtedly the leading scholars in Trauma Studies, there are some names I miss in the volume, especially Maurice Blanchot and his inspiring *The Writing of the Disaster* (1980). Perhaps his absence is due to the early date of his work on trauma, 1980, in contrast to the other authors' key works that were published in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

². The Dersim Massacre involved the murder of forty thousand Kurds —estimations vary— at the hands of Turkish military forces in 1937 and 1938 in Dersim, now called Tunceli Province. Around three thousand Kurds were also deported from Dersim due to the same conflict.

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