1

Within Trauma

An Introduction

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As the problematic became absorbed into the taken-for-granted, the vulnerable self merged into biography. Body and self were mutually implicated in that biography of vulnerability.
—Virginia Olesen (1992, 210)

There is no life without trauma. There is no history without trauma… Trauma as a mode of being violently halts the flow of time, fractures the self, and punctures memory and language.
—Gabriele M. Schwab (2010, 42)

Ground Truths

The Sonoran Desert in autumn, after the heat, is beautiful. Hackberries and wolfberries emerge and barrel cacti blossom. Wildflowers open out in magenta, saffron, Indian red, and burnt orange, feeding butterflies and bees. Snakes map their route to winter sleep, lizards grow sluggish, and winged raptors—wintering hawks, kestrels, falcons, and owls—soar above the cover of fallen petals from summer-blooming perennials. And yet, the pastoral desert is also predatory. Lacerated mesquite trees bleed black sap. Cacti of all shapes and sizes protect themselves with spikes and spur. Deadly heat, especially in high summer, leeches moisture from flesh, leaf, bone, and tongue. Bullets target humans and animals, leaving corpses and despair in their path. Migratory trails, littered with debris and remains, are haunted by the ghosts of the men, women, and
children who walked them, entire families seeking a better life among people who hate and fear.

It is here, in this contradictory desert landscape in which we live and labor, that we began to assemble a working hypothesis about what it means to do intellectual work in the midst of great trouble. We take seriously Bruno Latour’s (2004, 239) question, with particular attention to the challenge of his metaphorical pessimism: “Is it so surprising, after all, that with such positions given to the object, the humanities have lost the hearts of their fellow citizens, that they had to retreat year after year, entrenching themselves always further in the narrow barracks left to them by more and more stingy deans? The Zeus of Critique rules absolutely, to be sure, but over a desert.”

In the spirit of Latour’s inquiry—but refusing the stereotype of the geographically and epistemologically negative space of the desert—we seek to foster a new humanities, one that respects fact and heart even after the disciplines have diverged over arguments about society and imagination, propaganda and information, constructs and cold reality, representation and experience. Our work is thus keen to meld the scientific with the affective, the voices of narrated pain with the determined habits of repair and psychic healing, the archives and realms of theory with the visceral, lived experiences of practice. Our approach is hybrid and interdisciplinary, accustomed as we are to inhabiting geographic and intellectual spaces shaped by plurality, risk, and diverse modes of being.

A Genealogy of Critical Trauma Studies

Critical Trauma Studies: Understanding Violence, Conflict, and Memory in Everyday Life is located both within and after various iterations of the entity known as “trauma studies.” In the field’s initial configuration, scholars challenged and deliberately moved away from psychiatric and/or biomedical approaches to trauma, which had dominated the field (e.g., Ball 2000; Fassin and Rechtman 2009). In mid- to late nineteenth-century framings, “trauma” was a disease of the mind, conceptualized as “traumatic neurosis” generated by railroad accidents (Erichsen 1867) and later as war-related “shell shock” and posttraumatic stress disorder, or PTSD (Young 1997). The condition of trauma became a target for
biomedical and psychiatric intervention, and in Foucauldian terms, traumatized individuals became subjects of and to various disciplinary practices that congealed around them. To be traumatized meant that one was psychically wounded and vulnerable, unwhole; therapeutic practices were aimed at “restoring” normalcy or stasis.

Epistemological shifts in which historians, cultural theorists, and others unraveled these biomedical and psychiatric meanings of trauma have led to a rich and robust body of work exploring, for example, history and memory (e.g., Caruth 1995; LaCapra 2001), narrative and its limits (e.g., Scarry 1985; Caruth 1996), memorialization (e.g., Sturken 1997, 2007; LaCapra 1998), cultural representations of trauma (e.g., Kaplan 2005), and genealogies of trauma (e.g., Leys 2000; Orr 2006). Taken together, these contributions have brought the study of trauma firmly within the purview of the humanities and social sciences, recognizing and naming “trauma” not only as a condition of broken bodies and shattered minds, but also and primarily as a cultural object. In these framings, “trauma” is a product of history and politics, subject to reinterpretation, contestation, and intervention.

Of course, these epistemological reframings do not diminish the reality of events. Earthquakes strike, buildings fall, and people die; bodies are devastated by bullets and bombs; famine, drought, and genocide decimate entire populations; planes crash (and disappear), trains derail, and cars smash into each other, twisting metal and limbs; loved ones become sick and die, or they are brutally murdered; sexual assault is pandemic; tornados and hurricanes rip houses off their foundations and children from their parents’ arms; wars shred lives, communities, and landscapes and send soldiers home in body bags. These events are recursive. Categorizing and responding to them not merely as events, but as traumatic events, with its helpful vocabularies, knowledges, and temporalities, is the stuff of critical trauma studies. The field seeks to reveal the processes by which things that happen are denoted as trauma. Critical trauma studies asks: What does it mean to use the discourse of trauma? To represent events as ruptures, breaks, and other deviations from the normal? And what, then, is the normal?

We are speaking here of “trauma studies” as if it is an established area of study. And indeed, there is a significant and influential body of work. But there is relatively little structural coherence to the field, especially
compared to other interdisciplinary areas like disability studies, American studies, and gender studies, all of which have become institutionalized to a much greater degree. This is both the virtue and ongoing (albeit productive) problem of critical trauma studies. The boundaries, scope, and content of the field are fluid and contested (Stevens 2011), as they have been from its inception. Yet the field, such as it is, has been forged through shared intellectual considerations of “modern” catastrophes such as war, genocide, forced migration, and 9/11, alongside everyday experiences of violence, loss, and injury. If there can be a conceptual heart of critical trauma studies—a domain of inquiry as various and global as its subject—we’d settle on a set of centripetal tensions: between the everyday and the extreme, between individual identity and collective experience, between history and the present, between experience and representation, between facts and memory, and between the “clinical” and the “cultural.”

A genealogy of trauma, such as historian Ruth Leys (2000) has provided, must inevitably travel through the historical development and deployment of PTSD, as well as other analytic objects of trauma, such as memory, narrative, representation, and materiality. However, such a genealogy might also travel through social theory, through the epistemes that gave birth to a proliferation of ideas about acute disruptions to the reassuring status quo. Critical trauma studies is, now, a still-evolving product of twentieth-century movements and ideas, including structural functionalism, psychoanalysis and its interlocutors, postmodernism and poststructuralism, the constellation of theories/methods/interventions known as “identity politics,” the turn to affect, critical body studies, critical race theory, and the new materialism.

Extending and challenging the focus on psychic breaks and cultural representations and interpretations, the material body is not absent from the imaginings of critical trauma studies. Indeed, the body has always been present if not fully theorized, its material insistence grappled with through investigations of somatic ruptures, such as railroad accidents and traumatic brain injury (Stevens, this volume [chapter 2]; Malabou 2012; Morrison and Casper 2012). The centrality of the brain to considerations (and treatments) of trauma has fostered new scholarly directions that attempt to link neuroscience with cultural analysis. The brain is understood to be “plastic” and thus responsive to interventions,
accidental or deliberate. The amygdala has long been a key site for investigations of trauma, connecting as it does to emotion and memory, and “trauma” is now recognized as capable of altering the brain’s structure and function. An important task for critical trauma studies is to learn from and make use of these neuroscientific “findings,” while also interrogating how neuro-stories are rapidly becoming hegemonic explanations and depictions of human life (Rose and Abi-Rached 2013).

This book follows from the many iterations of critical trauma studies that have come before, but we are especially indebted to what Maurice Stevens (2014) calls critical trauma theory. Here, the category of trauma is not taken for granted, but rather unraveled and interrogated to assess the political and cultural work that “trauma” does—both in the world, as well as for those (like us) doing the interrogating. Stevens writes, “Is there something particular or different about the contemporary moment that calls us to reflect upon injury and trauma in new ways? In the forms of mass labor exploitation, proliferating military conflict zones, industrial catastrophe, natural disasters, state austerity plans, and ecological system collapse, the past decade has given evidence of increasing harm being experienced by most of the world’s population.” In this way, Stevens draws attention to both the epistemological and broader geopolitical contexts in which critical trauma studies is unfolding.

That we are increasingly living in an “age of trauma” (Miller and Tougaw 2002)—that is, that the register of trauma is ever more frequently employed to account for understandings of ourselves, our actions, and the things that are done to us (and that we do to others)—invites consideration and, inevitably, intervention. We suggest that a popular imperative to frame both everyday and spectacular experiences alike as “traumatic” imbues an ethical component into critical trauma studies that must be named, considered, and worked through. There are high stakes not only in studying how and why people are injured, but in assessing, articulating, and even challenging hegemonic modes of diagnosis, rehabilitation, recovery, and redemption. The conceptual spine of this book—embedded within the glue that binds the pages—is that critical trauma studies invokes an ethics of intellectual and moral engagement.

Whereas clinical and psychological perspectives respond to trauma as a psychic and/or embodied marker of disruptive experience, a critical
approach attends to the ways that the category of “trauma” reveals and unsettles social and cultural classification systems, including how we triage subjects for “help” and intervention (Simmons and Casper 2012; Jackson, this volume [chapter 12]). Indeed, we would argue that twenty-first-century humanities, following on the heels of large-scale disruptions of the twentieth century, are broadly and locally constituted by the study of trauma itself. “Trauma” offers an “imminent” god, as it were, in which the humanities live and breath through the practices and needs of people at the edges—of space, time, and subjectivity—moving forth and back through various borderlands. As a set of intellectual ideas about ruptures in lived experience and transformations of self and being, critical trauma studies engages fundamental questions about our relationships with one another, the “natural” world, and other species (Casper 2014), with events, and with the very terms of our existence. Investigations of trauma are thus both ontological and epistemological, assemblages and intersectionalities, modes of being and ways of knowing.

Thinking and Doing

*Critical Trauma Studies* is the product of our individual and collective attempts to build on recent work in the field with the explicit goal of linking the domains typically understood as “theory” and “practice.” That is, we wanted to put “thinking” alongside “doing” in fresh and provocative ways. Many works have taken up trauma studies and trauma theory, and many have focused on the “doing” of trauma care (the “how-to” and “self-help” genres; see Berns 2011). Seeking to query and bridge this divide, we were motivated by a sense of obligation to find work that would challenge the tired canard that the humanities, supposedly “unmarketable” disciplines, have become irrelevant. In fact, we would instead suggest that we need ever more innovative and atypical convergences of the academic humanities and social sciences with their panoply of practical uses and inspirations.

This volume thus brings together those who think and write critically about trauma with those who work with people who suffer traumatic events, recognizing that *sometimes these groups are the same*. That is, the trauma theorist may also have been traumatized, and may also work as a “fixer” of trauma in some other domain, and may also interweave
these varied experiences in and through her own practices. Subjectivi-
ties and practices are multiple. The essays in this volume show that it is
precisely within disruptive moments of wounding and their aftermath
that human bodies and subjectivities—and, indeed, families, communi-
ties, and nations—become targets for inscription of the always-shifting
but deeply divisive categories of normal and pathological (Canguilhem
[1966] 1991), and of designations of affliction and appropriate healing.

It is not the case, we believe, that trauma practice is simply an ap-
plied version of critical trauma studies. Rather, the ethical and episte-
mological aims of each domain are different and overlapping. In one,
scholars are invested in critically engaging “trauma” as an object of
analysis, holding it up to the light, as it were, to examine its interior
scaffolding, and often conceptually divorcing it from its deployment
as an experience or diagnostic category. Trauma practitioners, on the
other hand, are obligated to engage trauma somewhat less critically,
and as it actually presents in the clinic, the psychiatric space, the shel-
ter, the prison, the body. As many of us engage in both critical trauma
theory and trauma work (for example, human rights, counseling, peda-
gogy, ministry, advocacy), simultaneously and often uncomfortably, we
are called to a specific kind of reflexivity. This self-conscious practice
offers a way of paying attention to the power dynamics, subjectivities,
and meanings invoked in our individual and collective research, writ-
ing, and activism about trauma.

As editors, our attempts to see light in the friction between practice
and theory are focused by a degree of hopefulness in the face of post-
modern skepticism about the integrity of the subject and the ways that
subjects are always already assumed to be healthy and whole, or are
able to be made so via the classic trauma and recovery narrative. While
shaped by and invested in critical trauma theory, this volume is deeply
concerned with issues of “practice.” We attend analytically to the trauma
apparatus while recognizing that we do so fully within it. We also recog-
nize it may be possible to discern the theorizing that emerges through
practice itself, including the workings of the body (e.g., Siebers 2008;
Moore and Casper 2014). If, as Stevens (this volume [chapter 2]) notes,
“trauma is as trauma does,” then we are firmly entangled within being
and doing, living and interpreting, memory and hope, and all points in
between.
Mapping the Collection

_Critical Trauma Studies_ is organized around three interwoven themes: politics, poetics, and praxis. Yet these categories are more than a way to “sort out” the book’s contents for our readers. Current work on trauma is richly invested in political strategies and operations, in questions of language and representation, and in “grassroots” concerns with how trauma and its interventions are enacted and responded to. The book’s chapters take up, embody, and interrogate each of these imbricated themes, with varying degrees of emphasis: some foreground biopolitical traces and processes, while others listen more assiduously to language (including its absence), and still others build narratives from the ground up, heeding lived experiences. In our view, these are the major conceptual and practical spaces at and through which critical trauma studies is unfolding at this particular moment.

Each contributor to this volume is a subject of _traumatization_, in an active sense of the term that is cognizant of trauma’s (and the study of trauma’s) subject-making features. The volume is deliberately “book-ended” with provocative essays by scholar Maurice Stevens and novelist Dorothy Allison, each deeply engaged with trauma, experience, and language but from quite different approaches. Both dare to articulate the investiture of language and narrative and their vital necessity in critical trauma studies—while simultaneously embracing the instability and inadequacy of text. They frame our collection because they make no apologies for gaps and poststructuralist destabilizations. They also, in different voices, tell it like it is. Practice and theory go on together, in spite of and because of all that, in the work of politics and praxis. Conjoined with the other essays in this collection, these offerings show how feeling, knowledge, practices, and power are mutually constitutive and profoundly political.

And so, in “Trauma Is as Trauma Does: The Politics of Affect in Catastrophic Times,” Stevens sets the tone for our collective dialogue with intellectual depth, generosity, and creative critique. Working from within a comparative studies tradition, attentive to history, language, affect, and politics, Stevens locates trauma as a biopolitical apparatus rather than “simply” an experience or category per se. He focuses on the affective economies of trauma, how the concept of “trauma” works
in both productive and limiting ways. For Stevens, the term “trauma” is invoked when subjectivity, assumed to be rational and ordered, has been destabilized. But in relying on trauma as a diagnostic category, we also reproduce the apparatus of trauma. This may constrain the kinds of “posttrauma” reactions (individual and collective) that ensue and also preclude other kinds of openings and avenues for social action. Trauma, in this framing, is interwoven into a key part of a control society. As Stevens reminds us, we need to pay attention not just to what trauma does, but how it does as well—especially among those “drawn to the glow of its inchoate affect.”

Legal scholar Francine Banner globalizes the trauma apparatus, offering a harrowing account of Chechen women suicide bombers. She suggests that geopolitical trauma produced by the Russo-Chechen conflict was expressed in the embodied subjectivity of the bombers. Interrogating both “trauma studies” and “terrorism studies” as distinctly Western projects, Banner looks to the female bombers to explore gendered, somatic effects of trauma. Rather than positioning the suicide bomber as a deviant figure, she instead reveals the Chechen women as products of an assemblage of occupation, militarization, and gendered inequality. In this assemblage, women’s bodies—linked visually and biopolitically to the national body—served as targets for sexual and reproductive violence and as objects of moral and political debate. Banner notes, however, that the women’s collective status as victims did not negate their agency; suicide bombing became, in fact, a way for women to assert a kind of political agency in the face of trauma. Here, “the Chechen woman suicide bomber is not a monster, an aberration, or even an anomaly,” but rather a spectacular embodiment simultaneously of collective trauma, political violence, and social suffering.

Feminist psychologist Breanne Fahs turns our attention to nomenclatures forming the trauma apparatus, specifically the importance of nuance in naming women’s experiences of sexual violence. She suggests that in a social context rife with misogynistic violence against girls and women, the binary of “offender”/“victim” obscures rather than illuminates the scope of harm, while also separating people (especially women) from their own experiences of trauma. Fahs locates the language of trauma not in victimized subjectivity that would lead to individual healing (i.e., the psychological framework), but rather in the
messy and contentious sphere of politics and power, in which women are systematically disadvantaged. This sphere shapes our cultural fixation on victims (especially women and children) rather than perpetrators, indicating a kind of fascination with and paranoia about sexuality run amok (on view in popular culture in shows like *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*). Fahs notes that this is not merely a semantic issue: “Regardless of whether women choose to name their traumas as rape, or whether we label violent behaviors as offending, antiviolence movements should recognize that the very tenets of masculinity and femininity require (masculinized) violence, on the one hand, and the (feminized) assumption of access and consent, on the other.” The result of such binaries is a politics in which rape culture finds apologetics at the highest levels of power.

Carmen Goman and Douglas Kelley, representing communication studies, explore an especially vexing issue in critical trauma studies: forgiveness. They note the term’s varied meanings in the social sciences, including distinctions made between interpersonal and intrapersonal forgiveness, one directed outward and the other inward. Both have implications for thinking about trauma, subjectivity, and politics more broadly. Goman and Kelley compellingly suggest that historical traumas often contain within them the logic of forgiveness, reflecting a contextual approach to understanding trauma. Following a helpful overview of forgiveness typologies, Goman and Kelley turn their attention to Simon Wiesenthal’s *The Sunflower*, wherein Wiesenthal chronicles a specific incident in which he refused to forgive a dying Nazi. Troubled later by his actions, Wiesenthal invites commentary from writers, theologians, Holocaust survivors, and others, and these responses form the second part of *The Sunflower*. Goman and Kelley analyze the responses, eliciting themes that deepen our understanding of forgiveness and the situations in which it is offered or withheld. They note, “historical trauma calls for a reevaluation of one’s collective, the offending collective, and the relationship between the two. Such a massive undertaking may be evaluated only with great care over time, precipitating alternating times of silence and interaction.”

One of the most interesting themes to emerge from the essays is trauma’s production of silence. As scholars and clinicians have shown, traumatic events disrupt everyday understandings and lived experiences, a
disruption most tellingly registered in the realm of speech and writing. Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain* (1985), a theoretical subtext for much of this volume, argues that torture tests the limits of language's truth claims in its deterioration of the nexus between body and expression; silence is conceptually and emotionally eloquent when the body is in pain. After trauma, the subject may be voiceless, unable to articulate her experience or who she has become. And into that silence is poured a host of meanings and expectations, including perhaps most painfully the imperative to speak and to act, to recover and to heal. If, as Stevens has noted, trauma makes subjects, then what are the stakes of trauma’s compulsion to produce speaking subjects? In various ways, our authors address this question, whether Shahla Talebi’s narrative of the child Bahareh, the place of an ethical silence in response to Nazi horrors, or Debra Jackson’s account of silently giving witness to rape victims.

What if these silences are the interruptions that matter? That is, the spaces in and through which subjectivities are formed may be disruptions constituted by a temporary absence of words; such silences (after Freud, Foucault, et al.) are the biopolitical work of trauma itself. Understanding and narrating trauma as it takes place under the sign of silence offers generative questions, most provocatively in relation to silence in the realm of poetics. As scholars and practitioners, we often must attend to temporalities of re-creation and development in the crushing absence of audible meaning. But what do we miss, analytically and affectively, when we fail to stop at the void, the hush, the space between the inhale and the exhale? When we don’t listen to the silences, when we do not remain within the trauma but skip across it like a stone on water, how many other grammars are disabled? And yet, how might we (can we even) speak for the silent (Spivak 1988), those whose voices are muted in vulnerability rather than raised in outrage?

Shahla Talebi’s chapter offers a story about the truthful silence that is never fully an absence, how it exists just on the other side of torture’s noisily incoherent techniques. Gabriele Schwab’s “transgenerational haunting” is embodied in Talebi’s narrative voice, a curious chain of mangled but expressive signifiers passing from a mother to a child and, last, to a critical mind with its own story of loss. Bahareh, the child in Talebi’s recollection, reshapes language phonologically, taking the typographical signifier and turning it sideways, resulting in a new word,
“amama,” that is both intensely personal but also bearing a kind of politics, resistant and resonant. Bahareh has indeed “refused to speak the language of her killers.” This beautiful narrative attempts to speak outside the frame, through the imagination of a narrator—after the state, after the atrocity, continuous with past and future. Bahareh, for whom Talebi becomes a voice, memory, and future, inhabits an unconsciousness that spans time and space, after her witnessing but never beyond it. Bahareh and Talebi share their loss through the medium of the writerly unconscious, in which the past is brought back and theorized, documenting the possibilities for speech and writing in the face of radical distortion, erasure, and destruction. Bahareh’s story, in Talebi’s voice, has a narrative end, but never a temporal closure.

Nor are its meanings bounded within our volume. Literary critic and theorist Gabriele Schwab’s essay converses with Talebi’s narrative, exploring the intersections of trauma, silence, memory, and language. Taking up the story of Bahareh, Schwab articulates the meaning of silence within the confined space of the prison, locating Bahareh’s story in a transitional space between individual and collective trauma. The child communicated only through body language and inarticulate sounds, seemingly recognizing that words might be dangerous inside the prison walls. Upon her release, she regained the ability (perhaps the will?) to speak, recognizing that her speech and her life were no longer precarious. Schwab writes, “When it does not come from a peaceful place, silence creates anxiety and fear.” Thus, Talebi and others “heard” the child’s silence through a world made mute by terror. Listening to the silent child reveals to the imprisoned women connections between them, the speaking. Rather than creating a wall, Bahareh’s silence instead engaged “the silenced traumatic core of [the women’s] selves.” Here, the absence of language actually speaks into existence a vital, if unsettling and pained, community. At the same time, the silent child is interpreted by others—here, two scholars—posing vital questions about who speaks for whom, and when.

Next, we have an intellectually searching, profoundly moving conversation about genocide and the Holocaust between Schwab and philosopher Martin Beck Matuštík.1 Themes for the interview emerged from Schwab’s (2010) book, Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma. In the interview, we witness Matuštík’s psycho-
analytically nuanced inquiries eliciting a series of beautifully composed thinkpieces that merge high theory with personal revelation. The dialectic between Matuštik and Schwab reveals two minds alert to the problems of memory in the wake of multiply layered historical atrocities, and the jealous and tender political moralities that trail such histories. Schwab provides the biographies of her ideas and of her transgenerational self—a self-composite of family specters—and, in the process, puts trauma directly into the multidirectional past, ethically charged, poetic, and luminous.

Emergent literary scholar Amanda Wicks addresses a different type of apocalypse, analytically exploring Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*—a landscape seemingly beyond forgiveness. Noting that narrative accounts of traumatic events tend to draw on apocalyptic language and themes, she writes that “it seems increasingly beneficial to turn the tables and read the escalating number of post-apocalypse narratives published since the late twentieth century through the lens of trauma studies.” In exploring the language and form of apocalyptic narratives, Wicks is attentive to issues of memory, forgetting, survival, and history. If, as she notes, the apocalypse signifies an “impossible history” that is “not worth recuperating,” what does this mean for critical trauma theory? As represented in *The Road* (both the novel and the subsequent 2009 film), memory may be detrimental to the operations of survival, dragging the survivor(s) back into an “impossible history” and overwhelming subjectivity. If self-witnessing and narrative are crucial to recovery and reintegration of the subject, as many trauma practitioners argue, then how does forgetting for the sake of survival figure into this? In the realm of bare-bones survival, as exemplified in the post-apocalyptic narrative, forgetting may trump memory—and indeed, the very work of memorialization shapes both what is forgotten and what is remembered.

Next, sociologist Jackie Orr draws on her astonishing and provocative mixed-media performance piece. Here, in an adaptation of that performance, she offers a version of the artistic piece along with urgent critical thoughts about how live performance might be translated to the page. With attention to imbrications of the visual and the textual, the present and the archival, and the violence inflicted on bodies by technologies, Orr asks what it means to exhibit corpses. Moving back and forth between Gunther von Hagens’s Body Worlds, Fallujah, World War I, family
history, the Cold War, and popular culture, Orr meditates on the complex, historically shifting relationship among bodies, visibility, weaponry, affect, and the spectacular, and she does so with her trademark playfully serious language. She queries how we see the dead (and death) when corpses are so widely distributed across digital networks and sites of display. What does death mean when it happens remotely? And what does it mean to traffic with the dead, to narrate/visualize death, and to (try to) remember the dead?

Writing authority Amy Hodges Hamilton takes us into the classroom, her classroom specifically, and also into her own life as she struggles with her young daughter’s leukemia diagnosis. Drawing on a teacher-research study she conducted about the use of personal narratives in academic settings, she offers compelling evidence that such accounts—and the process of writing them—can contribute significantly to a student’s educational experience. Focused on the subfield of writing and healing, her moving essay blends her roles as teacher, writer, and mother, and offers a critique of “objective” academic discourse. She writes, “Students come to our classrooms with many literacies or discourses—personal, cultural, global. Why should the academy value one over the other?” As scholar-teachers, many of us encounter personal writing in our classrooms, even when we’re not actively teaching memoir and autobiography. Hamilton offers some helpful guidelines for working with students who share “personal” details in their classroom writing. She also vividly illustrates, through the details of her students’ writing, that the classroom is a space where “trauma” is narrated, responded to, and occasionally healed. Her work attests to the continuing importance (and difficulty) of critical—and empathically engaged—pedagogy and mothering.

Philosopher Debra Jackson also examines responses to trauma, focusing specifically on sexual violence. She does so from the feminist perspective of witnessing as a crisis counselor—a potential counterpoint to the nomenclature problems described earlier by Fahs. Intimately engaged in questions of practice, Jackson explores embodied effects of trauma, including loss of speech, symptoms recognized in psychiatric literature as PTSD, and anxiety. Often, she notes, recovery of one’s subjectivity necessitates the ability to narrate one’s story, to name the trauma inflicted so as to contain it. This is a form of self-witnessing. Jackson describes the experience of being a witness to others’ trauma,
Within Trauma and an ethical participant in the recovery of others’ subjectivity. Yet, here again, even in praxis language breaks down. In a poignant scene from the ER, Jackson portrays her own capacity for speech failing in the face of a rape victim’s silence. She writes, “The gap between us felt insurmountable.” She comes to understand that the witness must suspend her own judgments and bracket her feelings in order to focus wholly on the victim’s story, even if that story is silence. And rather than a binary with the power to silence and reinscribe, as in Fahs’s piece, we have in Jackson’s work witnessing as a dialogic and intersubjective process: “An effective witness to trauma connects with survivors without collapsing the boundaries between self and other. In the process, two narratives are written.” But it is not a symmetrical process; bearing witness requires empathic and ethical reflexivity.

Sisters Rebecca Hankins, an archivist, and Akua Duku Anokye, a sociolinguist, use oral history methods to document the experiences of their family in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Interviewing twelve of the nineteen displaced members of the Hankins family, the authors chronicle issues of structural disadvantage, including race and class, in the post-Katrina dispersal. Family members evacuated to Texas, and only some returned; each migration impacted lives considerably, wreaking havoc on intimate relationships, educational aspirations, personal and family economies, and quality of life, while also providing some limited opportunities for change. Hankins and Anokye draw important connections between PTSD as it is understood in the psychiatric literature and the phenomenon of posttrauma slavery syndrome, or PTSS. Their essays show trauma’s effects are deeply racialized and historicized, and we often miss both effects at great cost. African Americans experienced Hurricane Katrina in ways that both extended and emphasized their historic structural vulnerability. Hankins and Anokye’s work offers a window onto one family’s experience of a “natural” disaster, while also showcasing the value of oral history to our interpretations of trauma.

Our final essay is novelist Dorothy Allison’s “A Cure for Bitterness,” narrated in her inimitable voice. A writer, teacher, mother, and radical feminist, Allison offers up a living theory of trauma, grounded in experiences of violence, pain, damage, and the unspeakable. She poses a vital critique of academic obfuscation, while also navigating the dan-
gerous territory of telling stories about pain and suffering. She tells us that while we may have lived through trauma, this does not entitle us to write about it—a bold claim in the age of memoir. As a teacher, Allison encounters all sorts of horror stories—damaged people who want to put experiences to the page—and there are dangers in doing so, both to the writers and their teachers. She asks: Should all terrors be narrated? What does it mean to tell a good story, one that is believable? Who owns the language of trauma?

Allison tells us boldly that to write trauma, we need to have already done the work of engagement with our experiences; the writing itself is not the place to “heal” from our trauma, because that would get in the way of the story. And our stories, she tells us, whether we are writers or academics, are all fiction, no less true for being embedded in language and narrative, and dependent on that which eludes the speaking and listening subject.

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There are many riches herein, as we’ve signaled in this introduction, but Critical Trauma Studies cannot—and should not—be all things to all people. It necessarily reflects the interests and commitments of those who created this collection—those who are drawn to “catastrophe’s glow,” to borrow the lovely title of Maurice Stevens’s next project. We hope many will seek to join the “chorus” of voices (Griffin 1993) speaking about and within critical trauma studies. The book’s contributions reflect what can emerge from the spaces of ethically engaged scholarship and praxis. And while linkages are shared across these pages, readers themselves will perform the connective tissue holding this volume together, animating the politics, poetics, and praxis of which we speak and write. The reader becomes the healer, the visible stitch, in the choreographed but imprecise movement of following “traumatic” pathways through this book.

Note