

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Casper, Monica J. and Eric Wertheimer, eds.** *Critical Trauma Studies: Understanding Violence, Conflict, and Memory in Everyday Life*. New York: New York University Press. 2016. 293 pp. \$30.00 paper (9781479822515)

**P** psychological trauma can be defined, roughly, as the effect of an experience which the mind is unable to process, assimilate, and assign to the past. A traumatizing experience, therefore, is defined not by its intrinsic properties but by the mind's response to it (Herman, 2001). Critical trauma studies takes this anti-essentialist insight one step further by examining how social relations and cultural meanings *produce* trauma, in two ways. First, relations of denigration and oppression entail traumatizing experiences for individuals and groups — through class, race, gender, sexuality, and so on. Second, the concept of trauma is, itself, socially constructed and performative.

This interesting, often insightful collection explores the socio-cultural dimensions of trauma across a wide variety of settings, including war in Afghanistan and Chechnya, Iran's Evin Prison, the Nazi holocaust, and sexual and racial violence in America. Several contributors write from experiences with activism, victim advocacy, or therapeutic practice, and several reference personal traumas of their own. Many of the contributions take an explicitly feminist or intersectional approach. The editors, Monica Casper and Eric Wertheimer, are professors in Gender and Women's Studies and in English, respectively, and the collection is highly interdisciplinary with contributions from Africana studies, justice studies, communications studies, and comparative studies as well as from more traditional disciplines like philosophy, religious studies, English, and sociology. The book includes an introduction that speaks to the context, themes, and aims of the collection.

Some chapters are written using conventional social science methods: a content analysis of laypersons' writings on forgiveness, for instance, or a case study of one New Orleans family's experiences after Katrina. Others are personal, even poetic: a written translation of a performance art piece about Fallujah; an extended meditation on one girl's silence in Evin Prison; a bitter and yet hopeful lecture on surviving sexual abuse. Other chapters combine the clinical and the personal: a literary analysis of trauma and forgetting in Cormack McCarthy's *The*

*Road*; a conversation with Gabriele Schwab about the children of perpetrators of atrocities; a very useful discussion of the practical aspects of crisis intervention and rape survivor advocacy; a pedagogical study on addressing personal trauma — students', and one's own — in an undergraduate writing class.

Sociologists may be challenged and frustrated by the intense subjectivity of some chapters, especially in the middle section on "Poetics", but these chapters are worth wrestling with for the insights they offer into the affective experience of trauma. Personally I found the book's final four chapters, which present grounded studies of how trauma affects people's everyday lives, to be the most interesting; I wish the book had inverted its chapter order to begin with the concrete and move towards the abstract instead of following the standard practice of putting the theory chapters first.

Certain themes run through the collection: silence and speaking, forgetting and memorializing, narrative as a form of healing. These themes are taken up in quite different ways by different authors. For instance, some authors describe silence as one of trauma's pernicious effects, while others consider how silence may function as a defense of the self against atrocious trauma. Likewise, remembering appears for most authors as a necessary step in healing, but some contributions point out ways in which forgetting, too, has a survival value. While most contributors seem to accept the notion of trauma as a fracturing of the self, and healing as the reconstitution of that self, some contributions suggest that the supposed integrity of the self is itself a social construct, and possibly a chimerical one.

This latter idea is stated most explicitly in Maurice Stevens's contribution, "Trauma is As Trauma Does: The Politics of Affect in Catastrophic Times". Stephens argues that "[t]rauma' functions as a kind of state servant and ideological apparatus, because it helps to perform the work of shunting affect into 'appropriate' and state supporting practices" (31-32). Stephens claims this is necessary because the complexities of social life "constantly challenge the myth of individuality, independence, and isolated ego, to a degree that essentially requires the emergence of a cultural concept that can do the work of recuperating this myth that is collapsing under contemporary realities" (27). This is a suggestive claim, one that indicates a path towards some potentially very fruitful lines of inquiry. Unfortunately, that's about as far as Stephens gets: pointing out that "trauma," as a concept and an assemblage of practices linked by that concept, is socially constructed, contingent, and articulated with existing power relations. It's an important insight,

but it marks only the beginning of serious thought on this subject, and Stevens doesn't go any further with it.

This sense of unfulfilled promise pervades the book, making it exciting reading but also frustrating in places. In the Introduction, for instance, Casper and Wertheimer write that "we seek to foster a new humanities," one that is "keen to meld the scientific with the affective" (2) and that "an important task for critical trauma studies is to learn from and make use of [...] neuroscientific 'findings,' while also interrogating how neuro-stories are rapidly becoming hegemonic explanations and depictions of human life" (5). Unfortunately, these very exciting lines of inquiry are not actually pursued. None of the chapters engage with neuroscience. More broadly, none of the chapters attempts any detailed critique of clinical psychology. The contributors delve bravely into the affective, but pass by the scientific in silence.

The very idea of critical trauma studies suggests a radical inquiry into how social systems, personal experience, and biophysical (including neurological) mechanisms all co-produce each other. Such an inquiry could reflexively map how both traumatizing experience and the concept of "trauma" are implicated in the production of entire social orders. This collection establishes a starting point from which such a mapping could be launched, but the actual exploration awaits further research.

Overall, *Critical Trauma Studies* opens the subject of trauma to sociological investigation in interesting and fruitful ways. There are specific chapters I will be recommending to colleagues and to graduate students as pertinent to their research, and some I will use for teaching. The book is strongest for the insights it offers into the social and cultural dimensions of personal experiences of trauma, and for anyone whose research deals with traumatizing processes, it is worth a look on those terms. But also, if this book is any indication, the subfield of critical trauma studies offers new rows to hoe for sociologists who appreciate humanistic insights into personal experience but would like to develop these into a more systematic form of knowledge.

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## REFERENCES

- Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. London: Pandora, 2001.

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