

The Future of Trauma Theory

Contemporary literary and cultural
criticism

Edited by

**Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant and
Robert Eaglestone**

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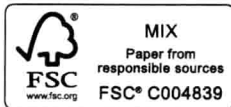
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PREFACE

Beyond Tancred and Clorinda—trauma studies for implicated subjects

Michael Rothberg

What do we talk about when we talk about trauma? Any assessment of the future of trauma studies must start with that question. The answer—even, or especially, in a book that asks us to reflect on the future—will necessarily be historical: we need to start from the assumption that answers will vary across time and across cultural context. Trauma today is probably not the trauma of twenty years ago and certainly not the trauma of the early twentieth century. Yet the way we talk about trauma today and tomorrow will certainly bear the traces of those earlier layers of historical accretion. Trauma is perhaps best thought of not as any kind of singular object, but rather—in the helpful conceptualization Roger Luckhurst adapts from Bruno Latour—as one of those ‘knots’ or ‘hybrid assemblages’ that ‘tangle up questions of science, law, technology, capitalism, politics, medicine and risk’ (Luckhurst 14–15). Luckhurst’s capacious genealogy of the trauma knot helps us avoid familiar, reductive accounts that simply link the rise of trauma studies to the expansion of Holocaust consciousness or the context of post-Vietnam America (although these are surely crucial). Instead, he reveals how, over the course of more than a century, the problem of individual psychic suffering became ‘tangled up’ with an array of the larger problems of modernity, including industrialization, bureaucracy, and war.

Thinking genealogically about trauma is one essential means of opening it towards possible, alternative futures. Genealogical thinking loosens up the reified common sense that tends to cluster around concepts that achieve a rapid rise in popularity, as trauma clearly has in the humanities since the publication of Cathy Caruth’s landmark edited volume *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995). If the explosion of interest in trauma seemed to come out of nowhere, Luckhurst demonstrates how it actually emerged from a whole host of somewheres. With a focus more on what is to come than on what has been, the chapters in *The Future of Trauma Theory* nevertheless derive from a similar critical engagement with the

current state of the field. While recognizing their debt to the intellectual genealogy that culminated in the poststructuralist theorization of trauma in the 1990s, the contributors are not bound to or by it. Both individually and, most powerfully, taken together, they make an irrefutable argument that in the future—and, really, already in the present—trauma studies will need to travel further and add a whole new series of destinations to its agenda.

Some of those new destinations are geographical or geo-cultural, and inhabiting them will require recalibrating inherited concepts. As Stef Craps makes clear in his chapter, we cannot assume that a category crafted in Europe and North America can travel smoothly to all other cultural locations: ‘the PTSD construct reflects a Eurocentric, monocultural orientation’. Several of the other contributors to *The Future of Trauma Theory* help us begin envisioning what an alternate orientation might look like. Without by any means abandoning all the insights crafted in Europe, Ananya Kabir leads us through the dispersed ‘affect-worlds’ of the black Atlantic, Cambodian Buddhism and the Sufi-inflected Islamicate; Nouri Gana asks us to consider what it would mean to dwell in the post-catastrophic context of civil war Lebanon; and Lyndsey Stonebridge moves us from a refugee camp in Australia to the uncanny imaginary landscapes of Kafka, while gesturing at the all-too-real urgencies of contemporary Palestine.

But even those who remain focused on Europe and North America argue for the need to rethink the central categories of trauma studies. History, after all, moves on, even if we stay in place. Thus, Jenny Edkins continues her reflections on how, in the post-9/11 moment, the state has colonized a previously disruptive traumatic temporality and integrated it into its sovereign chronologies; Dominick LaCapra invites us to rethink fascism and Nazism from a lens inflected by ‘post-secular’ concerns; Pieter Vermeulen alerts us to the changing biopolitical horizon in which trauma is both produced and policed; and Luckhurst himself evokes science fiction in order to turn us toward potential futures in which the technological transformation of subjectivity will (if it doesn’t already) necessitate a transformed notion of trauma (for more on ‘trauma future-tense’, see Kaplan).

In their different ways, then, the essays collected here call on us to nuance our notions of trauma by revealing their cultural and historical specificity. But if we are to redirect the field of trauma studies, the simple call for specificity must lead to a second moment of theoretical re-elaboration. For, however we conceive it, trauma is also a category that ought to trouble the historicist gesture of much contemporary criticism as well as its concomitant notions of history and culture. Theorists such as Cathy Caruth have famously claimed that trauma dislocates history and makes it difficult, if not impossible, to think in terms of singular historical or cultural contexts (Caruth, *Trauma; Unclaimed Experience*). Critics of Caruth—including several here—have pointed to the limits of classical trauma theory’s dislocation of its own context of emergence (i.e. its failure to transcend a Eurocentric frame), but that does not necessarily negate Caruth’s point. Indeed, it is difficult for me to imagine trauma as not involving dislocation of subjects, histories, and cultures. These dislocations are everywhere in the non-European archives evoked here: in

the alienating work of the Lebanese novelist Elias Khoury discussed by Gana, in the kinetic *kuduro* dance moves of post-civil war Angola vividly described by Kabir, and in the activist and aesthetic resistance of the Woomera inmates in Stonebridge's reflections. Even if we must conceive of multiple forms of dislocation—those that result from events, from systemic violence, and, in LaCapra's terms, from transhistorical, structural trauma (LaCapra, 'Trauma, Absence, Loss')—we can only maintain trauma as a theoretical category by recognizing overlaps and similarities across the historical and cultural contexts we track. As Edkins argues in similar terms, event-like 'ontic' trauma reveals structural, 'ontological' lack. This is the work of theory: in Kabir's words, 'theory's drive is to generate connections and paradigms that must work in, and despite, different contexts.'

Here, I think, the 'new' trauma theory is still in the process of developing paradigms to match those of its classical, psychoanalysis-inspired predecessors. That is, classical trauma theory provided us with a powerful hermeneutic for linking events of extreme violence, structures of subjective and collective experience, and discursive and aesthetic forms. Once we have revealed the specificities hiding under the apparently neutral and universal face of this understanding of trauma—its attention to events and not systems; its assumption of privileged, secure subject positions; its investment in fragmented modernist aesthetics—it is incumbent on us to provide the counter-forms that would maintain trauma as an object of inquiry. Pluralization alone is not enough. In various ways, this cutting-edge collection makes moves towards a new paradigm that might link up apparently divergent sites and moments. One of the most promising may be the biopolitical framework developed in several of the essays. Via the approach inspired by Foucault and developed by Agamben and Esposito, among others, questions of power and life itself have begun to enter more fully into the field of trauma studies, as the essays of Edkins and Vermeulen, especially, demonstrate.

Even as we seek to maintain trauma as a theoretical category, we should not, of course, attempt to subsume all forms of violence, dislocation, and psychic pain under its categorical singularity. The project of building a non-Eurocentric, fully historicized trauma theory should not be an imperial one. I agree with LaCapra that it can be productive to talk about trauma without explicitly naming it, but I would add that we might also want to think about the relationship between trauma (named or not) and *other* disruptive social forces. We should be suspicious of overgeneralizing the trauma concept because, as Vermeulen points out, its circulation 'risk[s] strengthening "immunitary" tendencies that perpetuate rather than minimize trauma ... especially in an age of globalization.' That is, when power operates biopolitically as the management of life, trauma talk in the centers of political sovereignty may activate concerns about security and contagion that lead to asymmetrical forms of violence rather than egalitarian, global solidarity. The post-9/11 United States is the most obvious example of such a phenomenon.

In the face of the paradoxical need to pluralize trauma while recognizing the limits of its applicability, I would like to suggest that we think of the trauma category as *necessary but not sufficient* for diagnosing the problems that concern us as

scholars and human beings. To explore what it might mean to declare the category of trauma necessary but not sufficient, I want very briefly to add two examples of contemporary and future urgency to the important areas of concern discussed elsewhere in this volume: the status of labor under globalization and the impact of climate change. These examples both confirm the necessity of de-provincializing trauma and suggest in turn how such a move necessitates that trauma studies join with other fields and methodologies of inquiry that, like the critique of biopolitics, address the mutations of power and the conditions of life.

In the fall of 2012, two factory fires in South Asia killed hundreds of garment workers who were making clothes for subcontractors of European and American companies such as H&M, Wal-Mart, and Gap. In September, a fire killed at least 262 workers in a factory in Karachi, Pakistan, while 112 died in November during a fire in Dhaka, Bangladesh (see Bajaj; Walsh and Greenhouse). These events are not exceptions—more than 500 Bangladeshi workers had already died in fires in the last six years before the recent catastrophe—and they are obviously not limited to South Asia. Surely there is plenty of evidence of trauma here, but conceptual clarity is crucial if we want to move beyond a confirmation of what we already know and a simple denunciation of global capitalism (as worthy as such denunciation is!). To start with the obvious: trauma is not a category that encompasses death directly, but rather draws our attention to the *survival* of subjects in and beyond sites of violence and *in proximity* to death. The dead workers are not the victims of trauma, and thus trauma theory can only partially reckon with their death. But if trauma theory cannot fully encompass the event, that does not imply that a renovated trauma studies is of no use. What kinds of violence are at stake here and how does trauma fit into this scenario?

We clearly have an intersection of two forms of violence that concern the contributors to this volume. We have a sudden event of extreme violence that could very well have traumatized survivors of the fires and families and loved ones of the workers who perished, even if we cannot predict precisely what their experience will have been or the form their response to it will take. But, in addition, that event takes place on the site of—and thoroughly embedded within—a system of violence that is neither sudden nor accidental: exploitation in an age of globalized neo-liberal capitalism. To be sure, exploitation can be both physically and psychically traumatic, and yet, as with the problem of death, the category of trauma cannot subsume it without an important loss of analytical clarity—in this case, the sort of clarity that a Marxist critique of political economy can provide. Despite their non-coincidence, however, this example does succinctly illustrate how tightly exploitation and trauma are interwoven. The mechanisms of neoliberal accumulation not only seem to require the everyday regimen of sweatshop exploitation under inhuman circumstances, but also enable the ‘extraordinary’ (if still predictable) event of the factory fire. As the *New York Times* reported, it is precisely the neo-liberal structure of voluntary, ‘industry-backed “social-auditing”’ of workplace conditions that makes possible, even likely, such devastating fires (Walsh and Greenhouse). Here we see how an event-focused trauma theory needs

to understand the conditions of structural violence. At the same time, we can speculate that sociological accounts of structural violence could benefit from event-based models in order to understand the psychic effects of systemic exploitation, effects that would have implications for organizing resistance to such structures.

But another step is necessary to encourage us to move beyond an isolated conception of trauma studies: the structures of globalization undergirding this (all too ordinary) example necessitate a turn back on the producer of theory in a way that classical trauma theory has not always demanded. That is, ‘we’ producers of theory in the Euro-American academy—as all the contributors to this volume are—are part of this picture: our seemingly insatiable consumption of clothes and gadgets and our habituation to the benefits of globalization (in many realms, if not in all) drive the regime of accumulation in factories like these as much as do the corporate drive for profits and the devious system of factory inspection. Trauma theory has helped us to think about the relation between perpetrators and victims—even if it has, in the (in)famous example of Tancred and Clorinda, sometimes confused them (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*; Leys; Novak; Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*; Craps, in this volume). But these categories alone are not sufficient to understand ‘our’ positioning in this globalized scenario of exploitation and trauma. Nor is the third term usually brought in at this point sufficient: the bystander. We are more than bystanders and something other than direct perpetrators in the violence of global capital. Rather, in the terms I have been developing in other contexts, we are *implicated subjects*, beneficiaries of a system that generates dispersed and uneven experiences of trauma and wellbeing simultaneously (see Rothberg, ‘Multidirectional Memory’ and ‘Progress, Progression, Procession’).

The notion of the implicated subject—neither simply perpetrator nor victim, though potentially either or both at other moments—also proves useful for thinking about the second context of violence and trauma I want to explore: climate change. Taking account of the devastation wrought by human-induced climate change and environmental degradation similarly requires a move beyond event-centered accounts of violence, as Rob Nixon suggests with his concept of ‘slow violence.’ In order to understand the impact of ecological disaster on the environments of the world’s poor—in other words, the same people most directly and harshly affected by the neo-liberal regime of accumulation—Nixon argues that we need to comprehend ‘a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales’ (Nixon 2). This ‘violence of delayed destruction,’ this ‘attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all’ (2), also results, I would add, in more familiar and ‘visible’ forms of trauma, such as wars and punctual (‘natural’) disasters. As with the case of exploitation and factory fires, climate change is a site of knotted and mutually dependent forms of violence; and, as in the previous case, the impact of both slow and punctual forms of violence can surely be traumatic. But is trauma theory—even one that is non-Eurocentric and open to systemic, non-spectacular violence—the only or best lens for exploring the environment’s ‘long dyings’, to which Nixon wants to draw our attention? At most, it seems to

me, trauma studies could play a subsidiary role in addressing a problem that demands multi-faceted, interdisciplinary approaches.

The slow violence of climate change does not only require a shift in temporal perception away from the shattering event of classically conceived trauma; it also requires a recalibrated understanding of humanist history and subjectivity that displaces (without entirely eliminating) the positions of victim and perpetrator. Although distributed unevenly, and disproportionately impacting the poor and the global south, as Nixon reminds us powerfully, climate catastrophe ultimately implicates us all. (Hurricane Sandy's flooding of the Wall Street area of New York City in October 2012 might serve as an allegory of that fact.) According to Dipesh Chakrabarty, the evidence of climate change thus requires a new, post-humanist philosophy of history that would trouble not only key presuppositions of classical trauma theory but also those of Marxist and postcolonial theory. Drawing on scientists' proposal of a new geological era—the Anthropocene—in which, for the first time, 'humans act as a main determinant of the environment of the planet' due to the large-scale use of fossil fuel, Chakrabarty argues provocatively that '[h]umans now wield a geological force' (Chakrabarty 209, 206). What he calls humanity's 'geological agency' in the Anthropocene—a period chemist Paul Crutzen dates to the late eighteenth century (Chakrabarty 209)—entails the collapse of the distance between '[g]eological time and the chronology of human histories' (208).

In Nixon's account, slow violence already challenges our usual historical chronologies as well as the categories of perpetration and victimhood, but his account stays relatively close to Marxist and postcolonial understandings of history in highlighting the unevenness of the effects of climate change across rich and poor regions. Chakrabarty's adoption of the Anthropocene to describe our contemporaneity and his linked notion of 'geological agency' lead him to supplement Marxist and postcolonial visions with a more encompassing notion of our implication as a species in a common and novel problematic. Such a shift to a more universal implication, Chakrabarty clarifies, 'is not to deny the historical role that the richer and mainly Western nations have played in emitting greenhouse gases ... [b]ut scientists' discovery of the fact that human beings have in the process [of capitalist modernization] become a geological agent points to a shared catastrophe that we have all fallen into' (218). Chakrabarty's analysis suggests a paradox in the impact of geological agency, which he sees as an 'unintended consequence of human actions' (221): geological agency 'scale[s] up our imagination of the human' (206) by recognizing our planetary impact, but it simultaneously installs limits in the potentials of human freedom and in the possibilities for control over our environment. One may quarrel with Chakrabarty's relative emphasis of commonality over unevenness—his universalization of what I've called implication under the heading of the 'species' (21–2). Yet his formulation of a paradoxical human agency of unintended consequences helps us to grasp what he calls in his title 'the climate of history' as a problem of violence involving vastly different scales of temporality and modes of subjectivity than we in trauma studies have yet ventured to address.

The linked examples of globalized industrial production and human-induced climate change suggest a number of consequences for the future of trauma studies that are also evoked in different terms by the essays in this volume. First, they confirm the necessity, evinced by all the contributors here, of broadening and differentiating our understanding of what trauma is, along with our account of the conditions under which it is produced. As these examples and several of the essays demonstrate, the site of theoretical production of trauma theory—the Euro-American academy—has remained distant from many of the sites of trauma’s impact. Thus, second, we must continue to trouble the West/non-West binary that is at the root of Eurocentric thinking (and some forms of resistance to it): the distinctions between event-based, systemic, and structural trauma do not map onto any simple, geo-cultural map, but cut across all borders (even if their distribution is markedly uneven). In addition, the different sites of trauma—as well as the different sites of trauma theory—are linked in networks of causality, feedback, and mediation that require a more sophisticated tracing of knots and assemblages of violence than early work on trauma provided. Furthermore, not all violence and suffering are best described by trauma—even if something we can recognize as trauma often accompanies those other forms of violence and suffering. Exploitation and ecological devastation can be traumatic—and can certainly lead indirectly to trauma of various sorts—but their essence (also) lies elsewhere. We need better ways of understanding how different forms of suffering and violence may inhabit the same social spaces and we need to understand what such overlap entails for the possibilities of resistance, healing, and social change. Finally, both examples discussed here suggest that developing a *necessary-but-not-sufficient* trauma theory entails reflection on *implicated subject positions* beyond those of perpetrator and victim, such as the beneficiaries of neo-liberal capitalism and the inhabitants of the Anthropocene. As we contemplate the future of trauma studies and the changing nature of violence and power, this volume inspires us to construct new parables beyond Tancred and Clorinda.

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