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On trauma, geography, and mobility: towards Geographies of Trauma

In *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Lauren Berlant questions the usefulness of privileging trauma as a conceptual framework for understanding disastrous and devastating changes to people's lives. Discourses of trauma, Berlant argues, position the embodied experiences and material effects of geopolitical and geoeconomic restructurings as exceptional, yet for Berlant, they are anything but. Trauma, the author (2011: 10) writes, "is not exceptional to history or consciousness." Instead, Berlant (2011: 10) terms the condition of unexceptional precarity and constant vulnerability to globalized threats as "crisis ordinariness."

Berlant's argument suggests that what we call 'trauma' is really just a condition of everyday, modern life. In other words, trauma has become—has been—the norm. Berlant's argument brings the affective economy of "trauma culture" into sharp relief (Luckhurst 2003), highlighting the lingering ways trauma shapes peoples, places, and emotions. Her logic does not disregard the impact of so-called 'traumatic' experiences on human and non-human lives, but reveals that which trauma discourses tend to obscure: the structural nature of our contemporary, collective exposure to structures of violence, some more than others. This is why trauma continues to matter.

Historically conceptualized as a wound, or physical injury to the body (Greenberg 2003), modern psychologists have since theorized trauma as emotional wounding, or psychic forms of distress (Freud 1920-22; 1955; Caruth 1996). Emerging alongside Victorian-era female hysteria and post-World War One 'shell shock,' contemporary theorists have moved studies of trauma from individual wounds to the traumatized social body, especially in the humanities and feminist memory studies (Brown 1995; Leys 2000; Luckhurst 2008; Radstone 2000; Roth & Salas 2001). The capacity of trauma scholarship to incorporate individual trauma within collective responses to crises, prompted its re-theorization by a diverse coalition of activists, Vietnam veterans, Holocaust survivors, and feminists concerned with sexual assault. Pushing for the creation of a category that would incorporate the continued pain they suffered based on past experiences of trauma (Degloma 2009; Leys 2000), understandings of trauma proliferated with the identification of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, and its description published in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1980 (Caruth 1995; Degloma 2009).

As definitions expanded to include the ongoing and residual effects of trauma, traumatic events and experiences were no longer delimited to singular places and times. By characterizing trauma as ‘unknowable shock,’ or a rupture to the psyche, for instance, some work within trauma studies locates traumatic knowledges temporally and spatially *elsewhere*. As Caruth acknowledges, “...since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with *another* place, and in *another* time” (1995: 8-9, emphasis added).

Trauma’s mobility across spaces, places, and times is central to understanding its relevance to emotional geographies. Here, embodiment becomes a key facet of trauma’s mobility as it travels in and through bodies, and with it the paradoxical simultaneity of being in situ and ex situ. As subjects, we draw on our ‘situatedness’ even during the most traumatizing experiences, even as time and location become erased through traumatic repetition (Perera 2010; Walker 2010). Framing trauma through its location *elsewhere* allows for the conception of its movement across places, spaces, and times, and recognizes how it is relationally experienced across scales, bodies, and emotions. Reverberating outwards like aftershocks, trauma has a productively complex relationship to space.

Trauma theorists’ work on the places of trauma have led to what some call a ‘spatial turn’ within trauma studies, embracing an interdisciplinary approach to the relationship of trauma to space (see Burk 2006; Trigg 2009; Walker 2010; Perera 2010; Güney & Gökan 2010; Blum & Secor 2011; Till 2012a; 2012b; and Shields 2012). Part of the reason why trauma invites geographic theorizing is that it is both rooted in place, yet defies geospatial logics. The incomprehensibility and inability to make meaning out

of traumatic experiences, for example, means that the traumatized experience their suffering in ways that are both timeless and literally difficult *to place*. Caruth (1995: 153) writes that trauma represents “a history that literally has no place, neither in the past, in which it was not fully experienced, nor in the present, in which its precise images and enactments are not fully understood.” Flashbacks often occur in different times and places than the initial traumatic event itself; the traumatized psyche repeats its pain, (re)focusing upon a place—and time—that cannot be located (Walker 2010).

Mental and material spaces of trauma become enmeshed in counterintuitive ways. The belatedness of traumatic recognition unsettles the spatial connections between people and places: even if the traumatized return to the site of their suffering, the places will always be other than what they once were (Walker 2010: 53). Geographies of the traumatized psyche are fundamentally unmappable; they may resemble topologies, or spatial relations, as Blum and Secor (2011) argue, but never mappable topographies. Trauma becomes the linkage of individual psychological detours, repetitions, and locatable sites (Blum & Secor 2011; Walker 2010). This complex combination of psychological and material spaces represents, in part, trauma’s fundamental incomprehensibility: if it were mappable, it would have already been made meaningful. Walker (2010) thus calls for a ‘spatial turn’ within trauma studies, linking these conceptions of trauma to theories of the subject developed by critical human geographers, who emphasize the relationship between place, identity, and subject formation.

Over the past decade, geographers have increasingly turned to theorizations of trauma in order to understand contemporary events and experiences and their lasting impact on peoples and places (see Burk 2006; Dennis & Warin 2010; Blum & Secor

2011; Blum & Secor 2014; Till 2012a; Till 2012b; Marshall 2014; Tamas 2014; Shields 2012; Drozdowski & Dominey-Howes 2015; Drozdowski 2015; and Dominey-Howes 2015). Interdisciplinary theorizations of trauma have likewise turned towards geographic approaches to garner new insights on traumatized subjects (see Trigg 2009; Degloma 2009; Walker 2010; Güney & Gökan 2010; Perera 2010; De Vinar 2012). As traumatic events leave traces of past horrors upon the landscape, places that have experienced trauma *feel* differently, as scholars have documented (Till 2012a; 2012b; Calgaro 2015). Research with traumatized people brings up demanding and urgent questions about epistemology, methods, and processes of knowledge production, as geographers in a recent special issue of *Emotion, Space and Society* (Drozdowski & Dominey-Howes, 2015) explored. Finally, thinking about trauma as something ordinary, yes, but also exceptional—as *extra*-ordinary life—challenges geographers, and those applying a geographic lens, to think in new ways about how we understand the interplay between emotions, bodies, and spaces in times of increasing precarity.

This Special Issue

This special issue emerged from a series of sessions organized on “Geographies of Trauma: spatializing shattered subjects,” for the 2013 Meeting of the American Association of Geographers in Los Angeles. In this special issue, we use the phrase ‘geographies of trauma’ to refer to constellations of traumatic experiences, knowledges, and affects that coalesce around, and erupt from, instances of profound and devastating change. Berlant (2001: 43) argues that trauma is particularly difficult to define precisely because the spaces of trauma tend to be characterized by their “sensually overwhelming

and numbing” nature, and, the very unspeakability of these spaces, limits the capacity of language to define them. Instead, the author refers to trauma as a “concept/ metaphor” that, “like most categories called empty... actually overflows with meaning” (Berlant 2001: 43). Drozdewski and Dominey-Howes (2015) have similar difficulties summarizing how they understand trauma in the research field, settling on the description of an “assemblage of traumatic experiences.” Here, trauma is broadly conceptualized as the unpredictable amalgamation of traumatic experience that emerges throughout researcher encounters. Each of these approaches underscores *some* of how we understand trauma: Berlant’s (2001) concept/metaphor begins from the point of how trauma engages with particular processes of knowledge production, or how traumatic knowledges come into being, whereas Drozdewski and Dominey-Howes’ (2015) assemblage of traumatic experiences starts with the people and places where trauma is felt and becomes located. We believe trauma encompasses experiences and knowledges, but also affects as well, what Tazreiter (2015: 99) calls the “sets of reverberations, shimmers, and ripples generated through multiple acts, signals, and rolling waves of feelings, attenuations and dispositions” that are attached to traumatic knowledges and experiences, which come to be manifested on individual, collective, and societal scales.

Each of the papers in this special issue begins with concepts of trauma, their interplay with a variety of emotions, and their grounding in particular, situated and place-bound bodies. Yet each engages with the embodied aspects of trauma in very different ways, demonstrating the breadth of possible analysis emerging from bringing geography, trauma, emotion and embodiment into conversation.

Moss and Prince (2016), for example, explore the different narratives that emerge within the discourse of helping traumatized soldiers in Canada. Moss and Prince (2016) argue for the place of discourse and narrative within discussion of the embodied and emotional landscape of trauma survivors, noting that public discussions of PTSD often stress traumatized people's bodily symptoms over the emotional dimensions of living. Yet to envision the traumatized soldier as "an embodied self constituted by material and discursive forces within a given power and knowledge configuration, and reproduced by specific techniques of the self" is to account for the complex constellations of emotions, discourses, and narratives that constitute soldiers' everyday lives (Moss and Prince 2016: 3). In order to understand how discursive narratives shape soldiers' emotional, embodied experiences, Moss and Prince (2016) employ ideas of Foucault's concepts of truth games, the practices and politics that make up what becomes believed to be 'true,' and *parrhēsia*, or the notion of bravely speaking truth even when it places the teller at risk. Moss and Prince (2016) suggest a broadened scope for studies of emotion and trauma beyond the "particularist, place-bound body" (Mitchell 2006: 98). Narratives and discourses highlight how the complicated and emotional politics of truth surrounding traumatic experience are social and relational, embedded not only in the individual psyche, but also in the wider body politic.

Coddington (2016) explores the embodied, emotional landscape of trauma's mobility. She explores the mobility of trauma within a group of advocates in Australia's Northern Territory who work closely with traumatized people, connecting these experiences with her own autoethnographic self reflection and writing drawn from research fieldnotes. Scholars have introduced the term 'vicarious trauma' to describe how

advocates who work with survivors of trauma ‘take on’ traumatic experiences with their debilitating physical, psychological and emotional symptoms, but Coddington (2016) argues instead for trauma as contagion. Rather than transferring the experiences of trauma directly from survivor to advocates, as theories of vicarious trauma maintain, contagious trauma “spreads, compounding and binding together sometimes unrelated life traumas” (Coddington 2016: 1). Contagious trauma complicates notions of trauma bound by individual psyches, focusing on the *relational* nature of trauma’s embodiment as it spreads from person to person, expanding and transforming as it moves. Contagious trauma also highlights the relational aspects of embodiment through its focus on proximity. In response to the prevalence of contagious trauma within their work, advocates began to construct barriers and limits to further advocacy work, what Coddington (2016) terms “geographies of self-protection.” These behaviors simultaneously expand the reach of destructive public policies and constrict the capacity of advocacy projects to respond. Here, Coddington (2016) builds on relational understandings of trauma, focusing on the far-reaching consequences of its embodied mobility.

Mountz (2016) explores the emotional and affective landscapes of migrant detention on islands. Trauma is not simply located within the detention facilities under analysis, but also moves through and beyond facilities as it is transmitted across time and space. For Mountz (2016: PAGE), the transmission of trauma is visible through tracing what she terms ‘affective eruptions,’ the *embodied experience* of “doing interviews and reading transcripts of interviews and having the visceral experience of emotions suddenly erupting, moving quickly from their interior lodging to a new external home, from one

body to another, leaping off of the page.” Affective eruptions signify trauma’s expression among both detained migrants and authorities in the detention facilities, bridging their very different life experiences through shared understandings of trauma and emotion. For detained migrants, the trauma of detention travels well beyond the infrastructure of facilities, and Mountz’s (2016) analysis traces how traumatic incidents may lie dormant for long periods of time before erupting into the present. Trauma also affects authorities in detention facilities, although in quite different ways, and Mountz (2016) stresses the historical context of lack of control and autonomy in island communities that contributes to the eruptions of trauma among authorities. Mountz (2016) explores the implications of affective eruptions for a relational politics that relies on moments of encounter—the detainee encountering the authority, or the ethnographer encountering moments of affective eruption upon the page—to emphasize the shared humanity of participants, what Tolia-Kelly (2006) calls the “embodied recovery work” necessary to construct just social relationships.

Pratt, Johnston, and Banta (2016) traverse geographies of trauma unevenly spanning the global north and south. Tracing relational narratives of trauma across global economies of labor and migration, the authors theorize how trauma expands, collecting other, even contradictory, histories of violence as it moves from place to place. The authors track the reception of stories of trauma experienced by Philippine migrant caregivers, now living in Canada as part of Canada’s Live-in Caregiver Program, by the very communities affected by these trade policies back in the Philippines. Community theatre serves as a platform for communicating and connecting diasporic histories of trauma. Here, live performances relay the emotional testimonies of migrant workers

living in Canada in hopes of generating empathic associations from communities back home. When narratives of trauma successfully resound with local audiences, experiential moments offer fissures for reimagining political community based on shared experiences of suffering. At the very least, they offer participants opportunities to understand trauma relationally. When tales of pain and suffering fail to resonate, however, the affective exchange risks deepening the emotional wounds that separate the two differently afflicted communities, as Pratt et al. acknowledge. Engaging trauma narratives in cross-border conversation is risky business; in hopes of highlighting severe systematic exploitation and structural inequalities rooted in global north-south relations, these narratives also risk trivializing suffering along the very same lines.

Mieli-Voutsinas (2016) navigates trauma's more-than-representational spaces at the National September 11th Memorial & Museum (NS11MM) in her analysis of post-9/11 World Trade Center redevelopment. Partially recovered through sensory engagements with the material and immaterial world, trauma, for the author, is visceral and embodied; we cannot know trauma, per se, but we can and do *feel* it. This is especially true in places impacted by traumatic events. Mapping the emotional landscapes of embodiment at this particular geography of trauma, Mieli-Voutsinas adopts an affective approach to geographies of heritage, or what the author terms, "affective heritage." According to Mieli-Voutsinas (2016: 2),

[A]ffective heritage mobilizes embodied experiences in relation to memorial dogma to produce a kind of 'feeling truth' for visitors. This is especially true at sites commemorating traumatic pasts. Here, the more-than-representational spaces of memorial landscapes are vital to representing that which is 'unrepresentable'

and unknowable: trauma itself. [...] In affective heritage, the impetus is for visitors to *feel* meaning as it is produced through embodied encounters with and within memorial spaces.

Places of memory convey past horrors to museumgoers through experiential and embodied encounters with and within wounded space. Trauma is transmitted in spaces of heritage through visceral registries. The visceral ‘awakenings’ curated at these sites are uncertain at best. Within the spaces of the NS11MM, these transmissions can be, and often are, disastrously triggering for museumgoers, leading to a range of emotional outcomes: anxiety, panic, sorrow, anger, or even re-traumatization. In instances where visitors become overwhelmed by the affective transmission of trauma at the NS11MM, the distinction between virtual and actual trauma is nearly impossible to detect. As a site of national heritage, this has profound implications for informing cultural knowledges and subjectivities. According to the author: “As visitors are encouraged to *feel*...[traumatic space] at the NS11MM, ...affective heritage thwarts linear perceptions of time and place-bound notions of space as this traumatic past is *re-membered* presently by visitors” (2016: 3).

In the post-disaster landscape of Christchurch New Zealand, Adams-Hutcheson argues that trauma not only ensnares the body, it permeates it, seeping in through its pores and sticking to its skin. Moving beyond moments of traumatic rupture, Adams-Hutcheson theorizes the deep-seated nature of traumatic wounds suffered by local residents in the earthquake stricken region. Articulating a kind of ‘slow trauma,’ the author demonstrates how trauma continues to permeate bodies post-crisis through mundane modes of embodiment in daily life. In the author’s words, “Embodying trauma

also centralizes the body's corporeal capacities, including visceral registries, as an important geographical piece of traumatic experience" (Adams-Hutcheson 2016: 7). As such, traumatic events stay with bodies well beyond moments and places of impact, intertwining the everyday and the extraordinary, writing it on the skin. Trauma, for the author, threatens to contaminate all that it touches directly, in addition to all that it 'touches' *indirectly*. Uncontainable within places and spaces, Adams-Hutcheson maintains that bodies are also unable to contain traumatic experiences. This inability to keep trauma 'in its place' is cause for fear and anxiety in the earthquake-stricken Christchurch, where nothing, not even ground itself is stable. Trauma thus marks an ontological limit, an uncomfortable meeting of culture/nature; mind/body; interior/exterior; self/other.

The contributors to this special issue theorize unique geographies of trauma generated through relational encounters with particular bodies in particular spaces, places, and times. Situating traumatic experiences within specific historical and geographical contexts, the authors traverse a multitude of borders—physical, psychic, and political—as trauma unexpectedly moves through and between the differentially localized bodies of researchers and research participants in unpredictable ways. The spatial approaches presented in this special issue seek to promote an understanding of trauma that accounts for its place-bound geographies as well as its geospatial unruliness. Belatedly located *elsewhere*, trauma is simultaneously and paradoxically in place and out of place, of place and placeless. As such, we argue for relational theorizations of trauma that underscore the distinctiveness of such wounds, yes, but also the interrelatedness of wounding and wounded spaces; trauma is, after all, an internalized struggle of the self's

desire to recognize and accept the other; s/he who must not be named, but who gave us this wound (see Caruth 1996 on Freud 1920-22; 1955).

The focus of this special issue is not to reassert trauma's exceptionality, or to dwell melancholically on individual or collective instances of loss. Focusing on trauma as exceptional only furthers notions of it being unprecedented and unique, which, by privileging one's suffering at the expense of others, reactively risks expanding violence in the name of one's own victimization. As Berlant (2001) observes, such discourses only reify the fallacy of safety and security, something that most humans and non-humans living beyond and, in some instances, within the global north have had to mourn for quite some time. Furthermore, narratives of exceptionalism risk equalizing trauma along drastic lines of difference, what Berlant calls a "flatten[ing] out [of] trauma's bumpy terrain" (2001: 46). Equally troublesome, trauma becomes an equivocal, universalizing discourse with no equalizing rubric or moral application across place and scale. We see the papers in this special issue as contributing to understanding the widespread nature of traumatic events across geographies and the simultaneous fading expectations of *not* being traumatized in these unsettling times. As we have experienced in our own research processes, trauma enters when we least expect it to.

Studying trauma and its relationship to space and place has resulted in an intimate, albeit unanticipated engagement with trauma and its affects on our everyday lives as teachers, scholars, and researchers. As researchers in the field, we, the authors, have experienced both primary and secondary forms of trauma associated with our research topics, their subjects and objects of study, and, of course, the unforeseeable resurfacing of personal past narratives and histories of trauma as our own subjectivities

became interwoven and implicated in the emotional vortex of traumatic knowing in the field (see Drozdowski & Dominey-Howes 2015). Memories of childhood sexual abuse and assault reemerged in the context of our respective research fields. As we engaged with these affective forms of transmission of trauma, we frequently negotiated trauma and re-traumatization. ‘The field’ became infused with our own traumas as ‘object’ ensnared ‘subject.’

By revealing the intersections of our own traumatic pasts within the present contexts of our respective research fields, our recollections confound the spaces of here and there, researcher and researched, past and present, private and public, home and nation, self and other. Studying and writing about trauma has, as a result, deeply affected how we comprehend and theorize trauma as both mobile in addition to being situated in specific geographies, publics, and bodies. As traumatic pasts map themselves onto the wounds of other times and spaces, trauma’s ability to affect daily life—within and beyond the confines of the research field—is realized. We manifest these entangled traumas through our thinking, but also our bodies themselves, and the results can be painful and scary. Trauma reminds us that there is literally no place ‘outside’ of research—and conversely, no research that is ‘beyond’ the body. Such conclusions demand critical reworking of the academic voice and an openness to the vulnerability of living in times of “crisis ordinariness” (Berlant 2011: 10).

Articulating human and non-human expressions of pain and suffering as ‘traumatic,’ is key to theorizing life as *extra*-ordinary. What is called ‘trauma’ in one place and time may be met with sympathy and the wholesale acceptance of suffering *as* suffering; its articulation in other geographies, human and non-human, however, exceeds

recognition. Thinking of traumatic knowledges as “an historical present in which someone or a community has suffered enough to be said to live on but not beyond a trauma that defines the now” (Berlant 2001: 47), contributors to this special issue have traced ‘embodied echoes’ of pain and suffering to cultivate connective moments across distinct places, spaces, and times. In so doing, they highlight the interconnectedness of past and present, here and there, then and now, self and other. These relational modes of embodiment locate the structural nature of particularized forms of suffering in geographically expansive places and spaces and corporeally uncontainable bodies and embodied emotions. Although trauma as “crisis ordinariness” is now expanding to include liberal, universalist modes of embodiment, the conceptual aim of bridging trauma studies and emotional geographies in this special issue is political at its core (Berlant 2011: 10). As an affective form of knowledge, trauma aims to produce community through affective economies of emotion. These political communities, as we note, move bi-directionally; they can continue to engender more violence in trauma’s name, or they can aim to imagine futures beyond trauma’s current historical iteration.

In this introduction, we review the origins of trauma theory and its movement *elsewhere*. Trauma, as we have demonstrated, can embody multiple temporalities and spatialities as traumatic time and space move both forwards and backwards, occupying here and there, center and margin. Through the rupture of both spatial and temporal continuity, trauma exposes the threshold separating past from present, here from there, self from other. Trauma’s mobility forces us to engage with the ‘radical interconnectedness’ we share with others (Edkins 2003: 99); strained, perhaps, but not always irreversibly broken by traumatic experiences. The political implications of

geographies of trauma are not yet fully considered in this special issue, but they offer at the very least the potential to unsettle (Edkins 2003), to disrupt, to open a space where change may indeed be possible.

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