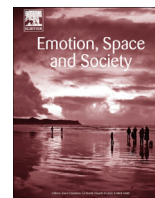




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# Emotion, Space and Society

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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; Freud, 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 and 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 after-shocks, 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 and Gökan, 2010; Blum and Secor, 2011; Till, 2012a, 2012b; 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 and 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 and Warin, 2010; Blum and Secor, 2011, 2014; Till, 2012a, 2012b; Marshall, 2014; Tamas, 2014; Shields, 2012; Drozdewski and Dominey-Howes, 2015; Drozdewski, 2015; 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 and Gökkan, 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* (Drozdewski and 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.

## 1. 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 (2015), for example, explore the different narratives that emerge within the discourse of helping traumatized soldiers in Canada. Moss and Prince (2015) 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, 2015: 3). In order to understand how discursive narratives shape soldiers' emotional, embodied experiences, Moss and Prince (2015) 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 (2015) 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 (2017) 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 (2017), 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

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