

## New Books on Trauma

### Reviewed by Professor Jennifer Travis

*Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community.* Edited by Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw

University of Illinois Press, 2002

Paperback:\$18.95

*Trauma at Home: After 9/11.* Edited by Judith Greenberg

University of Nebraska Press, 2003

Paperback:\$19.95

The explosion of interest in trauma theory among literary and cultural critics in the 1990s appears to confirm Kirby Farrell's claim that the United States is a "post-traumatic culture." While not a new diagnosis--Elaine Showalter has read the epidemiology of United States culture and called it "hystory," while others, like Robert Hughes, have labeled it a "culture of complaint"--several critics have begun to ask how trauma, a concept articulated over a century ago, has become a central trope in the cultural imagination of the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries.

Critics across ideological spectrums seem to agree that we are now living in an "age of trauma" and that our contemporary cogito may well have become "I Bleed Therefore I am" (Geoffrey Hartman qtd. in *Extremities*, 19). The term "trauma" itself has been around for a long time—it is from the ancient Greek word meaning wound—yet not until the nineteenth century would the meaning of trauma with its emphasis on the physical manifestations of "wounding" also include the wounding of the mind. With the proliferation of new technologies like the railroad and the abundance of physical wounds associated with it (accidents abounded on early railways), other kinds of non-physical disorders flourished. These "hysterical" symptoms, from the anxieties produced by train accidents and wartime shell shock to, later, the extreme experiences of concentration camp survivors and the victims of domestic violence, required a new vocabulary, a different kind of socio-political genealogy, to describe them. With the birth of psychoanalysis and the work of Freud and his contemporaries, psychical wounds were sundered from their physical counterparts; trauma, they argued, was a "hysterical shattering of the personality" (Ley, 33).

Despite these early voices, the discourse about trauma would also be marked by what Ruth Leys calls the “alternation between episodes of forgetting and remembering,” from the belated psychiatric response to the Holocaust to the emergence of clinical diagnoses such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which was only adopted as a clinical category by the American Psychological Association in 1980 (Leys, 15). Similarly, it would be many years before domestic violence was recognized, clinically and culturally, as a source of trauma. Judith Herman, a prominent voice in feminist theories about trauma argues that “not until the 1970s was it recognized that the most common post-traumatic stress disorders are those not of men in war but of women in civilian life” (Herman, 28). Given the cautious history and reluctant recognition of trauma, it becomes all the more notable that traumatic experience, at least colloquially, now describes a wide spectrum of events “including modern life itself” (Saunders, 29). We live in what the editors of the new volume *Extremities*, Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw, grandly label the “age of trauma” (1). They argue that “narratives of illness, sexual abuse, torture, or the death of loved ones have come to rival the classic heroic adventure as a test of limits that offers the reader the suspicious thrill of borrowed emotion” (2). The borders between “private self” and “public citizen,” the individual body and the body politic, my suffering and your sympathy, are being dissolved as the “limits of tellable experience” expands (2)

This is not quite how trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, and Shoshana Felman had theorized trauma early on, especially in relation to the paradigmatic traumatic moment of the twentieth century: the Holocaust. Caruth describes trauma as “unclaimed experience” characterized by its very “unassimilated nature,” an experience that returns to “haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth, 4). Other critics argue that the Holocaust “serves as a compelling example that unrepresentability and aporia can be integral to lived experience rather than the deconstruction of experience” (Cvetcovich, 27). If the Holocaust “supplies the paradigm” of traumatic experience and incommensurable suffering in contemporary discourse, *Extremities* seeks to examine what has emerged from it, what the editors describe as the “set of terms and debates about the nature of trauma, testimony, witness, and community—that has affected other domains of meditation on the forms the representation of extreme human suffering seems to engender and require” (4). There are a number of essays on the Holocaust in the collection, and each one looks in different ways at what Michael Rothberg, in his essay on Ruth Kluger’s memoir *Still Alive*, calls the “marking of boundaries” (57). From Marianne Hirsch’s examination of “postmemory” in her analysis of the “gap” between women survivors and their daughters, and Ross Chambers’s examination of the *Fragments* controversy and the phenomenon of “phantom pain” (Benjamin Wilkomirski’s personal testimony of survival published in 1995 under the title *Fragments* was met with great critical acclaim only later to be exposed, amid great controversy, as a fraud), to Susan Gubars’s reading of Sylvia Plath’s use of Holocaust material, each essay asks the question “To whom does the memory of the Holocaust belong?” (Miller and Tougaw, 10).

If the memory of the Holocaust belongs to us all, it does so, in part, because it has made the notion of testimony fundamental in our perceptions of ourselves. Essays by Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Jason Tougaw, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick examine the texture of testimony and its social and political meanings in and through extreme events and circumstances: mass violence against women, AIDS, and breast cancer respectively. In “Unbearable Witness,” Chun analyzes the 1989 massacre of several female engineering students by the professed “anti-feminist” Marc Lepin. Chun examines the discussion and silencing of the event in

Canada. “Like most traumatic events, the massacre invoked testimony not only from its survivors (the most vocal of whom, ironically, called for an end to the testimony), but also from those who were never physically present, who seemed to be testifying belatedly to a prior event” (144). The desire of victims and cultural critics alike to testify initiated a dispute about how the events should be interpreted. Was the massacre representative of enduring cultural violence against women, or should it be read as an isolated incident that required individual (and not necessarily collective) healing? Chun argues that the drive to testify obscures the more important social and political task of listening: “we need a politics of listening as a necessary complement to a politics of speaking. Feminism has often concentrated on consciousness raising, on producing speech that breaks one’s silence...The question of how to listen and respond to these testimonials has been largely unaddressed, since the question of listening...tends to be undertheorized and under-valued: more often than not, we assume we know how to listen” (144).

Personal writing about trauma and the act of listening to traumatic experiences has become crucial in the “construction of community and collective identity” (Miller and Tougaw, 14). What, we may ask, is the role of the cultural critic in this process? Patricia Yaeger’s essay, “Consuming Trauma; or, The Pleasures of Merely Circulating” queries: “If circulating the suffering of others has become the meat and potatoes of our profession, if this circulation evokes a lost history but also runs the danger of commodification, how should we proceed?” (30). Several essays in *Extremities* address the moral murkiness of the academy’s consumption of trauma in light of its search for a politics of empathy. Perhaps no recent event highlights this task more sharply than September 11<sup>th</sup>.

*Trauma at Home: After 9/11* is a collection of short essays that address on personal, scholarly, and clinical levels a variety of responses to September 11<sup>th</sup>. The essays mainly are by academics, but the collection also includes visual artists and poets among the voices represented. The collection, importantly, resists constructing a unified account of the after shocks of the terrorist attacks; some contributors analyze their grief, while others express their rage at the ways in which 9/11 has been co-opted for partisan political agendas. Peter Brooks in his essay “If you have Tears,” laments the “political failure of our mourning and thus its failure to bring us the right, sobering lessons about our global responsibilities” (49). He likens the current administration’s use of September 11<sup>th</sup> to Anthony’s use of Caesar’s body in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, in which the “mantel of mourning” is used to “conceal political maneuver[s]” (50). The public, argues Brooks, must be cautioned that “political mischief” is often “wrought from mourning” (51).

*Trauma at Home*, in fact, is home to several of the same critics included in *Extremities*: Michael Rothberg, Nancy K. Miller, Patricia Yaeger, Orly Rubin, and Marianne Hirsch, and it is particularly interesting to compare these writers’ accounts of trauma before and after 9/11. (Although *Extremities* was published in 2002, the collection was in its final editing stages at the time of the attacks and thus none of the essays take September 11<sup>th</sup> into their purview.) Marianne Hirsch, for example, questions how photography on September 11<sup>th</sup> not only enabled a form of “witness for the witness,” but also, to invoke her earlier phrase from “Marked by Memory” in *Extremities*, how differently this day “inflected the ethics and

politics of grief,” since commentators seem to agree that the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks were the “most photographed disaster in history” (71).

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 called upon us all to reckon with the vocabulary of trauma; we live in its aftermath politically, socially, and culturally. Whether or not it has made us think differently of “home” is a question we all may profitably ask ourselves. The collection *Trauma at Home* is a useful resource toward such a reckoning.

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