

[Conference report, "Gender and Trauma: Material, Methods, Media"](#)

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2019 Great Lakes History Conference: "Gender and Trauma: Material, Methods, Media"

Grand Valley State University, 20-21 September 2019, Michigan, Grand Rapids

Conference Report by Anne Freese (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin)

This two-day conference, co-organized by Jason Crouthamel, Julia B. Köhne, Peter Leese and Ville Kivimäki, marked an important station in a series of conferences and workshops, which aim to develop new questions about sources and materials, as well as innovative methodological approaches in historical and cultural trauma

studies.^[1] Almost 20 years ago, Mark Micale and Paul Lerner summarized the state of historical-cultural trauma research by identifying three different research

traditions.^[2] The first wave, starting with Esther Fischer-Homberger's study "Traumatic Neurosis" from 1975, used an intellectual history approach that investigated the history of the concept of trauma and possible "precursor concepts." The second trend, according to Micale and Lerner, was based on everyday history and made medical practice related to psychic trauma visible in clinical and therapeutic settings as well as the experiences, symptoms and treatments of patients. The representation of war or mass violence combined with traces of their psychological consequences in literature, art and film, such as war novels, war films and works of art, formed the third research trend at the beginning of the 2000s.

This 2019 conference attempted to build a bridge between representatives of trauma research and of gender studies in order to identify new relevant sources,

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develop new methods and questions, and pose critical questions to existing research results. To this end, an interdisciplinary dialogue was facilitated between researchers in different research fields as well as with teachers, activists, artists and people affected by trauma. Material and sources, themes and approaches circulated among the contributors and audience to understand how the concepts of 'masculinity,' 'femininity,' or 'queerness' are shaped and influenced by traumatic events such as war, genocide, economic crisis, environmental disaster, domestic violence and other forms of violence. Through this portfolio of themes as well as disciplines and professions, the conference offered an opportunity for a great thematic diversity and multi-perspective dialogue in trauma studies. In which way did the contributions to this conference then tie in with the research trends located by Lerner and Micale in 2001, and how were they able to expand and transcend former trauma research?

Trauma in the context of military conflicts

A number of panelists focused on traumatic experiences that emerged out of the context of armed conflicts, which have been intensively researched according to the third research trend in historical trauma studies. DEVLIN M. SCOFIELD, for example, focused on how the trauma of the First World War shaped conflicting republican and imperial constructions of Alsatian soldiers. He argued that French officials imbued the figure of the enemy Alsatian soldier with masculine, French patriotic virtue, while their German counterparts perceived their own Alsatian soldiers as potentially treacherous and weak. JENNIFER EVANS analyzed the traumatization of a single man in the age of total war who has become very well-known, the psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich. She examined the trajectory of his struggle to promote heterosexual orgasm as a form of healing disturbed sexual development during youth, which was considered as childhood sexual trauma, while examining how his own potentially unresolved traumas such as flight, suicide of his mother, political persecution, marginalization and exclusion from professional groups may have influenced his theorizing. The politicized and violent context of the apartheid state was the focus of PATRICK FURLONG's study. He explored intersections between the history of racial conflict in South Africa, fears about sexual violence, and the alleged need to protect white and especially Afrikaner women, whereas the trauma of very real sexual violence by white men against women of color was in fact embedded in white settlement, whether in wars of conquest, slavery, or enslavement of indigenous Africans. Turning the focus to Ireland, PATRICK BETHEL demonstrated how the Irish Nationalist media in the mid-nineteenth century sought to meld trauma derived from Ireland's colonial history

with gendered anxieties emanating from contemporary Victorian culture, in order to build a broad-based political coalition. By portraying discipline and chastity as the natural state of the Irish population, indiscipline and unchaste behavior were explained as the result of trauma and unjust rule, able to be resolved through the restoration of Irish self-rule.

Trauma in women's experiences

A majority of papers dealt with making the experiences of women in war situations visible, revealing how gender conceptions are negotiated as individuals react to violence and seize opportunities to resist or to rework gender role expectations. Jewish women in particular were at the center of a series of very engaging papers. The panel "Jewish Women Writers Articulating Trauma" presented the work of three Jewish women writers: Liana Millu, an Italian Holocaust survivor, Gertrud Kolmar, a German-Jewish writer killed in Auschwitz, and Alicia Partnoy, a survivor of 'the disappeared' in Argentina's Dirty War. In CARLA DAMIANO's paper, it became clear that the credibility of women's traumatic experiences is intensively negotiated. She showed that the lack of translation of the second part of Liana Millu's *I ponti di Schwerin* in the German edition, which deals precisely with how difficult it is for Holocaust survivors to find an audience, can be understood as "silencing upon a silencing." ELISABETH DÄUMER presented how, in the novel *The Jewish Mother* (1931) by Gertrud Kolmar, the Jewish widow protagonist Martha Wolg also negotiates her Jewishness through the abduction and rape of her daughter. In the novel, published posthumously as *A Mother* in 1965, the central character becomes increasingly alienated from the Jewish community and even begins to embody anti-Semitic stereotypes of Jewish 'femininity.' Later, she even becomes the murderer of her own child. DEANNA MIHALY also offered close analysis of horrifying experiences. According to Mihaly, the author Alicia Partnoy testified about her own disappearance and torture in Argentina in her account *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival* (1986). The protagonist gives a personal struggle for control, dignity and humanity but transforms her personal experience into the call for collective action and solidarity. ANDREA SINN's paper offered another gender-specific analysis of trauma, referring to the First World War, by providing new perspectives on often overlooked questions about the interplay of gender, politics and war. Highlighting an important aspect of Jewish war experiences, she argued that the war experience blurred the religious spheres which, until 1914, defined society. In fact, it turned women into historical actors who contributed to wartime solidarity and in turn played a decisive role on the German home front. Building on these themes, ASHLEY VALANZOLA looked at Jewish women's roles in Holocaust

commemorations and the ways in which gender and trauma shape contemporary ideas about the Holocaust in France. She analysed the frequently published and translated speeches of Simone Veil and Sabine Zlatin, who recalled their own wartime experiences when discussing topics such as sexual violence and the expectation for women to ensure their family's survival. DAGMAR HERZOG's keynote "Sexual Violence and the Nazi Holocaust" looked at women's experiences through the lens of the history of sexuality and sexual violence. The historian traced the sexual dimensions of the history of the Holocaust emphasizing how much sexual violence was rampant in the killing fields in the Soviet Union, perpetrated by the SS as well as by soldiers of the Wehrmacht. Although the historical evidence indicates, Herzog noted, that Jewish women (in contrast to political prisoners) were never forced as sex slaves for the SS in the extermination camps, this was adopted in post-war popular culture as a fantasy that became widely represented in popular media such as *House of Dolls* (1953).

All in all, several contributions to the conference made it clear that traumatic experiences of women during times of war bring to the fore a particular set of topics, which were predominantly characterized by sexual violence, as well as resulting pregnancies, and the care for children in threatening living conditions. It also became apparent, as has often been the case in women's studies, that a look at the history of women provides the basis for alternative periodizations in history. The different examples of gendered violence included EGOR LYKOV's paper, which investigated the influence of gender on the economic, social and cultural life of the Austro-Hungarian civilian population during the First World War. Civilians were locked in internment camps in the Austro-Hungarian state in order to remove 'suspicious' male and female civilians from the military areas. In sources from the Austrian State Archives, Lykov found primarily male-dominated perspectives. However, female views on hardship in the camps, such as sexual violence and prostitution, were neglected. ANDREEA PRUNDEANU-THROWER brought to light another aspect of sexual violence against women. She dealt with three groups that encountered wartime gendered violence and had undesired pregnancies: French women impregnated by German soldiers during World War Two, Rwandan women raped and forcibly impregnated by opposing ethnic groups, and Ugandan women coerced into 'marriage' and childbearing by LRA forces. The women's reactions varied: some distanced themselves from their children through abandonment, neglect, or infanticide, others attempted to overcome stigma and exclusion by forging strong maternal bonds. HEATHER PERRY's paper focused on another form of hardship, namely the malnutrition of Germans during the First World War and beyond, evidenced through cookbooks repeatedly published at the time, such as *The*

Little War Cookbook (1915) by Henriette Fürth or Hedwig Heyl's *The ABC's of Cooking* (1897). By looking at war through the eye of the "kitchen soldier" and through the lens of nutrition, the war could be described as a "Long Great War" with an extended period from 1914 to 1924, Perry argued.

By showing that traumatic experiences are gender-based in the sense that people experience similar but also different forms of violence according to their gender, this conference highlighted an important layer of contemporary historical and cultural trauma research. The contributions on the one hand transcended the predominant occupation with military conflicts and help to make experiences such as sexual exploitation, abuse of power and economic deprivation eligible as trauma. Papers concerned with men's violent experiences, on the other hand, understood them as individual male perspectives dealing with trauma, resisting the tendency to generalize this as an overall human experience. Therefore, it's worthwhile to add this partially new, gender-sensitive trauma research trend in contemporary trauma studies to Lerner and Micale's list.

Perpetrators' experiences of violence as "perpetrator trauma"

BENJAMIN R. NESTOR's paper was one of a few dedicated to the effects of violence on perpetrators. In particular, he examined how members of the "Einsatzgruppen," who murdered over 1.5 million Polish and Soviet Jews, rationalized their actions by referring to common "narratives of masculinity" such as duty, male tenacity and even comradeship. Nestor suggested that similar to regular soldiers fighting on the front, SS murderers suffered "moral injuries" during or after the murder of their victims. In addition, after an introduction by JULIA B. KÖHNE, the conference audience discussed the applicability and limits of the term "perpetrator trauma" on the basis of the documentary *Shades of True* (2015) by Violaine Baraduc and Alexandre Westphal. The film portrays "Female Perpetrators of the Rwandan Genocide" (the film's subtitle) by showing group discussions, (self-)critical interviews and prison scenes featuring "Hutu" women in Kigali prison who have been sentenced for their involvement in the 1994 Rwandan genocide. The documentary focuses, as Köhne summarized, on 'the human factor,' on distorted psyches and complex mental structures, on the role of beliefs, ideologies and loss of moral standards, that enabled or accompanied the outburst of mass violence and the transgression of human boundaries. Choosing a female perpetrator's perspective still appeared to be unusual but nonetheless welcome to many in the audience. The perpetrators' narratives were in most cases marked by a denial of guilt and justifications for their cruel deeds, which included envy for/of "Tutsi" women,

political support and incitement disseminated on propaganda radio.

By combining a gender-sensitive approach with questions about the perpetrator category as a counterpart to the perspectives of victims, this conference was able to shed light on neglected individual and collective dimensions that nevertheless can be part of any traumatic experience.

Traumatizations in film, radio, theatre, art, interviews and personal objects

Besides the manifold written sources presented at the conference, in form of novels, autobiographies, archival files and court cases, as well as newspaper articles, specialist literature and non-fiction books, alternative media formats were included as well. SEBASTIAN FRITZ-KLAUSNER placed contemporary US-science-fiction-cinema such as *Source Code*, *Iron Man 3*, and *RoboCop* at the center of his historically and culturally contextualized film analysis. He examined how technology is utilized to construct gendered and traumatized minds and a protagonist's reaction to trauma. He argued that, in a recent shift, science fiction would represent trauma by moving away from traumatic experiences as something that is impossible to communicate, to something that can be translated concretely through technology. Beyond film, STEPHANIE X. WU contributed a paper focusing on the 1994 Rwandan radio station *Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines*, and in diachronic comparison to this, various recent US-American (hate) radio talk shows, thus highlighting radio's capacity as an instigator of violence and agitation. MARGARITA SAONA examined the theatre play "San Bartolo" by Alejandro Clavier and Claudia Tangoa, which thematizes the experiences of young men who have been systematically abused by members of the *Sodalicio de vida cristiana*, a Catholic religious organization in Peru. In her paper, Saona argued that the so-called "testimonial theatre" is a form of dealing with traumatization and initiating collective healing. Further, Saona's paper was one of the few conference contributions that addressed experiences of sexualised violence in male children and adolescents. The artist CHELSEA MARKUSON gave detailed insights into her work, especially her performance "Our Work is Never Done." In it, she repeatedly performed the labor of plunging linen in different sites such as before the Holocaust Memorial in Leipzig, Germany, and the Hannah Administration Building at Michigan State University. In this performance, she approaches her Jewish family's intergenerational trauma as a framework that intersects with experiences from survivors of sexual violence. Through the female protagonists of Olanna and Naomi in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1985), IRO FILIPPAKI dealt with the material culture of war trauma, including cans of food, old letters and diaries, photographs, and various personal

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and household items. Drawing from historical, philosophical, and psychoanalytic scholarship on fetishism, she argued that the kind of reckoning with trauma narrativized by Adichie and Kogawa is unique to women's responses to war trauma, and that the work of mourning is accomplished through the inscription of affective use-value to objects of peacetime. Based on 36 interviews that she conducted, ANKITA MUKHERJEE explored the lives and the principle source of support as well as newly emerging political activism of India's oldest non-binary community, the hijras. This group comprises an estimated 2 million persons, and its marginalization has been shown to rank among the worst of India's disadvantaged groups. Considering the duality of Western and Indian categories, Mukherjee examined India's Rights of Transgender Persons Bill, which would make a case for nominal gender ternary, simultaneously reinstating the gender binary.

Interestingly, these papers focused in general on dealing with and healing traumatic events. Be it the use of technology in the 'translation' of traumatic experiences into film, the collective attempt at healing through the form of "testimonial theatre," the site-specific performance as a ritualistic process of cleansing and healing, as well as mourning and transformation through the inscription of value to certain material objects - different media seem to encourage individuals to engage with and negotiate the meaning of their experiences.

Traumatisation in medical discourse

Probably one of the most explicit forms of dealing with traumatization seems to be happening in medical literature. GWENDEN DUEKER, MARY BOWER RUSSA and JEFF KIELISZEWSKI showed that the experience of violence in the form of cumulative childhood traumatization increases the probability that the former victims' own children will be maltreated by their traumatized parent. The scholars applied a medical scale, the "cumulative childhood trauma measure," which measures 10 different types of traumatization in parents. This helped to specify the medical understanding of own experiences of violence and the exercise of violence against one's own children. Using school as an example, BETH RANKIN showed the consequences of teachers' encounters with traumatized students. The testimonies of her students' traumatization led her to show symptoms of "Secondary Traumatic Stress." Because teachers in public schools would be above all female, who according to medical research literature are more susceptible to Secondary Traumatic Stress than men, the author considers it important to deal with this topic more intensely in schools. The author of this conference report, ANNE FREESE, dealt in her paper with gender-specific assumptions of a related medical concept, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). She argued that whereas traditional

assumptions of female vulnerability are perpetuated in gender-specific research on PTSD, often via showing women's alleged lack of psychological and physiological support systems, 'masculinity' is clearly being reworked in the therapeutic sphere. For example, a supposedly masculine emotional style of not dealing with traumatic experiences by processing emotions is constructed as insufficient, dangerous for the health of the individual and society in general, and therefore in need of change. In her keynote "Trauma and Women's Voice in Public Testimony: Presencing the Future Past," the well-known author and psychologist PUMLA GOBODO-MADIKIZELA elaborated on her changing views on the process of social healing in Post-Apartheid South Africa and her work in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission from 1996 to 1998. On the notion on reconciliation, she emphasized a kind of "reparative humanism," a non-therapeutic engagement with violence which recognizes the perpetrator as a fellow human being. From the standpoint of an ethics of empathic care she suggested that recognizing the individual capacity to love and to heal loss may provide a way out of violence and asked the audience to turn to literature to find a language for this path. It seems therefore that from the medical angle there is to be a very precise language to describe and measure forms of emotional disturbance with a variety of trauma concepts. But participants also expressed the wish to challenge and move beyond a pure medical assessment of consequences of violence.

Implications for the subject of trauma

During the course of the conference, the concept of "trauma" fell into different forms and conceptions. In addition to more everyday language or even metaphorical descriptions of a shocking event, diverse theories were introduced, such as the psychoanalytical trauma theory of Sigmund Freud and Wilhelm Reich. Participants were guided by concepts of Secondary Traumatic Stress, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, Perpetrator Trauma, Moral Injury, Social Trauma, Dori Laub's theory on Trauma and Testimony, Collective Trauma, Shell Shock, and Intergenerational Trauma. It became clear that, in any given research context, the concept of "trauma" always needs to be historicized, reflected, and theorized. In this respect, the conference papers played a part in broadening the terminology of "trauma," sometimes almost to the point of 'exploding the term.' Nevertheless, the intersection of trauma and gender revealed a remarkable amount of disastrous experiences, especially from women and non-binary groups, which in academic discourse often remain hidden due to the strong focus on male war experiences. In addition, at the intersection of trauma and media, a variety of media formats opened up new and challenging narratives dedicated to the negotiation and processing of ever-changing

and precarious traumatic experiences. The category of gender therefore transcended earlier borders of historical-cultural trauma research but is nonetheless bound to the epistemological limits set by the use of the category “trauma” as such.

[1] ___ Preceding this conference was a series of events, including “After Shock: Post-Traumatic Cultures since the Great War” in May 2013 in Copenhagen, as well as a 2016 conference in Berlin, “Languages of Trauma. Body/Psyche, Historiography, Traumatology, Visual Media,” the first NOS-HS Workshop “Aftershocks: War-related Trauma in Northern, Eastern, and Central Europe” in October 2018 as well as the second NOS-HS Workshop on Historical Trauma Studies called “Surviving and communicating Trauma” in May 2019 in Trondheim.

[2] ___ Mark S. Micale and Paul Lerner, “Trauma, Psychiatry and History: A Conceptual and Historiographical Introduction,” in Micale and Lerner, eds, *Traumatic Pasts: History, Psychiatry, and Trauma in the Modern Age, 1870-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001), p. 1-27, p. 6-8.

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