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Trauma and Performance: Lessons from Latin America

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HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS TRAUMATIZE MORE THAN THE IMMEDIATE VICTIMS OF "BARBAROUS ACTS."[1] THEY WOUND FAMILIES, COMMUnities, and entire societies sometimes for years, even generations. While the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights locates rights primarily in the individual ("Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law"), it is clear that "the human family" invoked in the opening sentence both sustains claims to inalienable rights and suffers from their transgression. Nonetheless, most responses to violations focus on individual victims almost to the exclusion of family and the broader community. Several countries sponsor "torture clinics" to reintegrate victims into society or find them asylum elsewhere. Survivors are diagnosed, and therapists help them work through their trauma in different ways, usually involving individual, group, and family therapy. These important programs medicalize trauma as individual pathology and attempt to reduce symptoms and empower survivors. However, even when particular programs are successful, problems and contradictions abound. Not all communities have access to mental health care. Not all governments are willing to sponsor programs that recognize the traumatic effects of their political actions. The wider impact of criminal politics on society as a whole remains unexplored. The question of whether society is the site of the so-called normal rather than a highly repressive or toxic environment is left unexamined. The individual becomes both the exclusive site of traumatic injury and the subject to be healed.

Without pitting individualized experiences and treatments of trauma against collective ones, I propose here that trauma-driven performances offer victims, survivors, and human rights activists ways to address the society-wide repercussions of violent politics and also, indirectly, to relieve personal pain. The image of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo walking ritualistically around the central square of Argentina demanding information about their disappeared children from 1977 to the present has become emblematic of trauma-driven performance protest. The blown-up photos of the missing reinsert the

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disappeared in the ongoing social crisis. The Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, or Abuelas, also use theatrical means—including installations and theater (*teatro x la identidad*) to remind everyone that their grandchildren born in captivity are still disappeared, probably adopted by military families. The organization of the children of the disappeared and political prisoners known as H.I.J.O.S. (Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia, contra el Olvido y el Silencio 'Children for Identity and Justice, against Forgetting and Silence') continues to use personal trauma to mobilize collective acts of condemnation. It has created huge guerrilla-type performances, or *escraches*, acts of public shaming, to target criminals associated with the "dirty war" and keep the issue of human rights violations alive. H.I.J.O.S. swarms in groups of hundreds around the homes or offices of known torturers and other criminals, spelling out their crimes in yellow paint on the walls and sidewalks. Because few of the human rights violations have been prosecuted, H.I.J.O.S. vows to continue its protests until justice has been done. Other Latin American activists have adopted similar performance strategies. Rosario Ibarra de Piedra, leader of the Frente Nacional Contra la Represión (FNCR), joined with the performer-activist Jesusa Rodríguez to lead a massive *escrache* in Mexico City against the former president Luis Echevarría Álvarez. In Chile life-size photographs of the disappeared are placed in public spaces to remind the population that the long-term effects of criminal violence continue to make themselves felt everywhere.

It might not be evident at first glance what, if any, connection exists between the individual focus of trauma therapy for victims of human rights violations as practiced in torture clinics, for example, and the trauma-driven performance protests by families of the disappeared and human rights activists. Seldom does the literature on trauma put them into conversation.[2] The first focuses on survivors, while the second seemingly centers on those who have disappeared and are presumed dead. One emphasizes personal healing and adaptation, while the other stresses political denunciation and social justice. Neither seems to focus squarely on how the society as a whole internalizes traumatic violence. Without eliding the crucial contributions of each, I believe that trauma-driven performance does make visible the individual, collective, intergenerational, and even national repercussions of human rights violations over the long term. We might say that Latin American trauma-driven performance highlights not only what trauma is (etymologically a blow or wound) but also what trauma does, how it affects entire communities and mobilizes demands for social justice.

Trauma, by nature, is performatic.[3] Before it can be talked about, trauma manifests itself as an acting out in both the individual and the social body. Traumatic memory, according to Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, cannot be organized or accessed on a linguistic level: "this failure to arrange the memory in words and symbols leaves it to be organized on a somatosensory or iconic level: as somatic sensations, behavioral reenactments, nightmares and flashbacks" (172). Trauma expresses itself viscerally, through bodily symptoms, reenactments, and repeats. The fact that we cannot neatly separate trauma from posttraumatic stress points to the centrality of the reiterated effects that constitute the condition. Richard Schechner's definition of performance as "twice behaved behavior" and "never for the first time" holds equally for trauma (36). Trauma is never for the first time. Not all blows or wounds create trauma—just those that produce the characteristic aftershock. Thus trauma is known only by the nature of its repeats. Like performance, trauma always makes itself felt viscerally in the here and now. Past blows haunt our present and shake the individual and social body.

Paradoxically, however, even though trauma manifests itself through reiterated acts, it creates a sense of helplessness and

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paralysis. Again and again in survivor testimonies we hear, "I couldn't do anything" or "I didn't know what to do." Van der Kolk refers to this as "frozen action" (Public seminar). The same holds for collectivities. Bystanders who witnessed abductions and raids during the dirty wars in Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s recount that they did not know what to do. The excruciating visibility of disappearance was intended by the military to shock everyone into submission. It succeeded. Many pretended not to see or hear the atrocity—a numbing, self-blinding response that I elsewhere theorize as "percepticide" (*Disappearing Acts*). An active inaction or a concerted not doing seemed the best defense.

Acts—from the uncontrollable *acting out* to the therapeutic *acting through* to the political *acting up*—signal both the symptom and the "cure." Acknowledging their relatedness allows us to think of actions or performances that work simultaneously to mitigate the personal and collective effects of trauma even as they make their claims for social justice.

Whether we situate trauma in the individual or social body, its expression depends on live reenactments and interactive performance. Expression involves repetition compulsion and other acts that compartmentalize knowing. Van der Kolk and van der Hart quote Pierre Janet's description of a patient, Irene, who could not acknowledge her mother's death yet reenacted every gesture of her mother's dying night: "She brought a glass to the lips of an imaginary person, she talked to this person. . . . This reproduction of the tragic scene lasted three or four hours" (162). The knowing–not knowing also characterizes social trauma—though in it the not knowing requires more conscious effort than in the case of Irene. Bystanders in the dirty war tell how they covered their eyes or looked away in order not to know what was happening to their neighbors. They would cross the street to avoid the Mothers, dismissing them as madwomen and "emotional terrorists."

Transmission also works through the interactive telling and listening associated with live performance. Bearing witness requires live participation—it is a doing, an act of transfer that takes place in the here and now in the presence of a listener who "comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event" (Laub 57). The telling often manifests itself as both symptom and cure, repeated again and again. Alicia Partnoy spoke about how she would tell anyone and everyone who would listen what had happened to her and her fellow disappeared in the Argentine concentration camp known as the Little School. Staging trauma-driven performances in the public sphere further highlights the necessary role of witnesses. Like trauma, these performances suddenly disrupt the apparent calm. Although many Argentines turned away from the unwelcome spectacle, it became increasingly difficult not to see what was going on. While not therapeutic for onlookers, the protests forced them to confront their own denial. The protests also forced the public to expand its notion of victims. Partnoy refers to those who did not reappear as the victims and tries to tell their story. But she too is clearly a victim, as is her family. The Grandmothers, the Mothers, and H.I.J.O.S. are all victims of trauma—having suffered the uncertain and thus all the more devastating loss of their loved ones. Criminal politics affects many generations. All the members of society suffer the long-term effects of traumatic violence, whether they immediately understand it or not.

Through their weekly enactments, the Grandmothers and Mothers came to channel their own terrible loss into productive social action—a process that in fact helped relieve their pain. The husbands and fathers of the disappeared, who could not protest for fear the military would attack them, lacked a productive means of coping with the pain and more often committed suicide. Throughout the years, the women stressed that this tragedy concerned all Argentines, not just the indi-

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viduals directly affected by the abuses. Moreover, they would not let the issue die as the years passed. In 2001 the Grandmothers organized an interactive exhibit aimed at identifying their disappeared grandchildren and, by extension, reestablishing a cohesive national identity: "Finding them," their exhibit made explicit, "means finding ourselves."[4] In 2003 the new president of Argentina, Nestor Kirschner, recognized, "We are all children of Madres y las Abuelas of Plaza de Mayo," linking their trauma to the national trauma and positing the women's unending search for truth as a national model (Moreno).

Ultimately performance, like trauma, is not infinitely transmittable or transferable. Some individuals can bear witness and shoulder the trauma of survivors. Others cannot. Certain performances work in specific places and not elsewhere. While parts of the trauma-driven performance initiated by the Mothers caught on—the way the women held and wore the photos of their missing loved ones became iconic—others cannot carry over. Why did the Mothers' protest succeed and Cindy Sheehan's fail to spark a broader mother's antiwar movement? It is hard to say which blow will produce trauma, how and when victims will reach out, and which trauma-driven performances will transform a toxic political environment. But, in a final paradox, when the trauma is "over" or somehow resolved, so is the performance. The Mothers have decided not to continue their annual massive Marchas de la Resistencia, although they continue their ritualistic march around the plaza. Now that they're working with the president, instead of against him, to bring human rights violators to justice, they have no need to stage their resistance. But rather than mourn the loss of trauma-driven performance, I hope that it catches on elsewhere, in all the parts of the world where human rights violations continue to break individual and social bodies.

Notes

1. See Universal Declaration, preamble.

2. Scholarship on AIDS activism does place activism and mourning in dialogue—see Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feeling*, which discusses ACT UP's protests as a manifestation of collective trauma (their slogan is "Don't mourn, organize!") and Douglas Crimp's "Mourning and Militancy."

3. In *The Archive and the Repertoire*, I coined "performatic" (from the Spanish *performático*) to denote the nondiscursive realm of performance and differentiate it from the "performative" realm, which, as theorized by J. L. Austin, has come to mean language that acts, that does something. I use "performance" broadly to signal reiterative, "twice-behaved" behaviors that include not only theater and dance or musical recitals but also other conventional, embodied acts such as funerals, rituals, and protest movements that are bracketed from daily life.

4. Taylor, "'You are Here': The DNA of Performance," ch. 6 in *The Archive and the Repertoire*.

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