

Whitney Humanities Center Workshop Report

“The Trauma of the Perpetrators? Politics, Ethics and Representation”

December 10-12 2014

The workshop was convened by Yale Faculty: Ron Eyeran (Sociology), Alice Miller (Law, Public Health and Global Affairs), David Simon (Political Science, Genocide Studies), Laura Wexler (American Studies, WGSS) and Elisabeth Wood (Political Science and International and Areas Studies).

Participants: Jeffrey Burds, Dara Kay Cohen, Juan Manuel Echavarria, Meghan Foster Lynch, Raya Morag, Magnus Ring, Leigh Payne, Michael Reed Hurtado, Jacob Boersema, Bin Xiu, Todd Madigan and several doctoral students.

1. Motivating concerns

The harms suffered by civilian victims of atrocity and war and its representation as trauma in art, film, literature, law, and academic writing have been ongoing themes in several literatures, including those on historical memory, legal accountability for war crimes, humanitarian aid, and the mobilization for and social legacies of war. Relevant works span many disciplines, from social science and history to law, psychiatry, and public health.

That nearly all research on trauma, including its representation, is centered on victims is a pattern easily understood: humanitarian concern and morality draw us to those who have suffered, especially at the hands of others. Many wish to tell the victims' story, to bear witness to their suffering, to compile evidence, to recount, and to remember what has happened. In trauma narratives there are those who have been harmed, the victims, and those who are responsible, the perpetrators (to use a problematic term). This clean-cut demarcation has also dominated the literature that comprises much of our own research.

Significantly less attention has been paid to the trauma endured by those who wield violence and to the representation of such “perpetrator trauma” (see below). For example, that many combatants suffer trauma is increasingly evident in legal, scholarly, and policy work in many fields, from the analysis of the deployment of child soldiers, to the socialization of recruits into armed groups, to the attention now being paid to PTSD suffered by US service-members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. The idea that the categories of perpetrator and victim might not be exclusive, and that as a result there may be a degree of fluidity and complexity in the relationship between trauma, and to whom it is assigned and how it is represented, increasingly haunts scholarship and policy work on these themes.

2. List of key terms and orienting questions

Over the course of the fall semester, we—a group of about a dozen Yale faculty and graduate students -- met regularly to discuss the concept of *perpetrator trauma* in preparation for the workshop. We grappled with the question of whether there is such a

phenomenon, and if so, what its causes might be, how it might differ from other types of trauma, how it may be represented, and the politics of that representation. The December workshop continued this discussion, with a number of internationally respected experts.

For the purposes of our workshop, by *perpetrators* we mean actors who carry out (perpetrate) sanctioned or unsanctioned collective and political violence (some of whom themselves may also be victims of violence). We focus on those who suffer some sort of trauma as a result but also analyze those who do not. And we explore the cultural legacies of that violence for the collectivity.

Perpetrator Trauma: "The pain associated with damage to one's moral identity as the result of having committed an act of violence."

Our current iteration of *perpetrator trauma* takes its inspiration from Jonathan Shay's (1994) idea of *moral injury*. Although the two concepts have a good deal of overlap, they seem to be distinct, and we are trying to delineate the similarities and differences. The main idea is that when one suffers from *perpetrator* trauma—as opposed to *victim* trauma—one experiences a sort of moral dissonance. Of course, not everyone who commits an act of violence experiences this trauma. However, those that do must struggle with the pain it engenders, which will often lead to a re-narration of one's personal or collective identity in order to make sense of the otherwise incongruous act.

We understand moral injury as distinct from concepts such as PTSD, which is related but that has medicalizing and individualizing connotations that de-politicize the concept of moral injury.

Note that we considered four distinct meanings of "perpetrator trauma": i.e., the emotional experience of the perpetrator after wielding violence; 1) trauma later suffered by the perpetrator (which may be different from the first meaning); 2) the traumatization of recruits to mold them into perpetrators of violence; 3) the trauma of perpetrators significantly later if they are held to account in some way; and 4) cultural perpetrator trauma (see below). We settled on the definition above (with the extension to cultural trauma below) to focus our discussions on what seems at this point the most fruitful way forward.

Traumatic Position: "The position occupied by an individual or group vis-à-vis a traumatic incident."

We worked with the idea that there are three chief positions a subject can occupy vis-à-vis a traumatic incident: *victim*, *bystander*, and *perpetrator*. However, we have also considered that these positions are located on a spectrum with *victim* and *perpetrator* at the poles and *bystander* at the midpoint. Indeed, we note that many perpetrators (as defined above) are themselves also victims of such violence. And victims, too, may be far from innocent. Few subjects will fall exactly into one of these ideal positions, but will instead occupy positions somewhere in the gray areas between them. One's responsibility and agency are important elements in determining where one might land on the spectrum; one's position is not permanent and objective, but fluid and contextual.

Traumatic Incident: “An act of humanly-inflicted violence, broadly defined.”

There are a number of complications to this understanding. First, since trauma is defined first and foremost as a subjective response (i.e., *pain*), we are open to the idea that a multitude of experiences might be experienced as an act of violence. Indeed, some have argued that the *traumatic incident* might in some cases be wholly fabricated (e.g., in the case of false memories of violent acts that never actually occurred). Second, we have debated the concept of violence itself: killing, torturing, or sexually assaulting another human being have been among our exemplars, but there are, needless to say, many other types of violence. Violence, it can be argued, might also encompass the violation of human rights, such as the denial of medical treatment or access to adequate food, water, and shelter; it might also include the degradation of the environment, dangerous working conditions, institutional racism, etc. The element of duration is also salient to our concept of violence; most of our exemplars (massacre, assassination, bombardment, rape, torture) usually occur over the course of minutes, hours or days; but what of sustained violence? Does wielding violence over different time frames lead to distinct levels of moral injury?

Modes of Trauma: “Physical trauma, Psychic trauma, Collective trauma”

We maintain that trauma is a broad phenomenon that operates on a number of different levels. The concept of trauma dates back to antiquity, when it simply referred to a physical wound. In the late 19th century, the concept of trauma was adapted to denote psychic wounds, and in the late 20th century the concept was further modified to describe wounds on a collective level. In the cases of physical and psychic trauma, the sufferer is an individual. However, in the case of collective trauma, the affected entity is a group; we have focused on two levels of groups: institutions and organizations (e.g., the Catholic Church, the U.S. military; the Los Angeles Police Department) and social groups (e.g., African Americans, Jews, Japanese). Of course, one could specify other sorts of groups, such as families, corporations, etc. One of the key differences between individual and collective trauma is that in the latter, one might not have personally experienced the particular traumatic incident. For example, Bernard Giesen argues that the German nation—including those born after 1945—suffers from cultural perpetrator trauma. Many Germans today feel the guilt and shame of the violence committed in the Holocaust, even though they had no personal part in it. The means by which trauma becomes ‘collectivized’ thus becomes an object of study.

With these clarifications in mind, we considered the following questions:

Is there a distinct type of trauma endured by perpetrators? How does it differ from that suffered by the victims of violence?

What is the relationship between the perpetration of violence and the witnessing and/or suffering of violence? What distinguishes perpetrators who suffer moral injury from colleagues who do not? Is it possible to disentangle the effects of violence suffered, witnessed, and wielded by someone who becomes a perpetrator?

Does the inversion of the experience of power, in turning from victim to perpetrator, play a role in creating perpetrators?

How is perpetrator trauma represented across various media and disciplines? How is it represented within armed organizations or other collectivities carrying out acts of violence?

When the violence is structural over long periods, as for instance racism in the U.S.—and indeed integral to the functioning of society—what sense does it make to speak of perpetrators rather than simply citizens of the state of violence?

Does the perpetuation of structural racism, as in the racially differentiated modalities of citizenship revealed by Ferguson, differentiate and expose perpetrators, or is this form of aggression structurally immune?

Is there any state that has not been formed out of the original violence of structural exclusion?

What role do memory and post-hoc moral revaluation play in the experiencing of perpetrator trauma?

What are the legacies of perpetrator trauma for the post-conflict period?

Under what conditions does perpetrator trauma become cultural or collective? For example, it has been argued that the collectivity of postwar Germany has suffered perpetrator's trauma in the wake of the Holocaust; might other collectivities be liable to similar trauma?

What are the political and ethical implications of a research program focused on perpetrator trauma? In particular, how might the representation of the trauma of perpetrators challenge contemporary narratives of reconciliation, justice, and accountability? Do the various conventions of representing trauma limit the social, cultural, and political space that might be available for such a challenge?

Over the three days of the workshop these issues were articulated through short presentations by our participants and then in the discussions, which evolved and developed over the days. In the end we reached no definitive conclusions, but were so stimulated by the discussions that we are pursuing ways to reach a wider audience through publication.