

Trauma by Lucy Bond and Stef Craps. London: New Critical Idiom, Routledge, 2019, 173 pages. Review by Lewis Kirshner.

This concise and informative treatment of the history and changing uses of the term “trauma” covers a broad range of topics, from clinical to popular social contexts. While the book’s intended audience encompasses mainly literary and cultural scholars, students in mental health disciplines and social sciences can find much here of relevance for their own fields. Trauma, as the Bond and Craps observe, has become a thriving subject of political and social discourse, applied widely and sometimes loosely to an enormous variety of situations. As such, it has expanded our understanding of forms of human suffering, both the psychological effects of personal and social violence, and the more subtle influence of global events like environmental and technological changes on our lives. At the same time, the prevalent focus on trauma risks becoming a master narrative that obscures important political and economic issues. The authors tread a careful path between an appreciative, receptive approach to the expanding applications of the concept of trauma and a critical skepticism about its relevance.

Chapter One introduces the history of the trauma concept with the 19th century’s concern with physical injuries resulting from the changed conditions of modern industrial life. Puzzling medical complaints following railway and work accidents created legal and financial problems with which European societies increasingly had to wrestle. Not the least of these was the status of non-organic afflictions that raised medical suspicions of malingering, character weakness, and the validity of diagnoses like hysteria or neurasthenia. Freud, of course, adapted the term trauma to the impact of life events on similar patients who consulted him for various mental and behavioral complaints. Under the influence of the French neurologists Charcot and Bernheim, he redefined hysteria as a post-traumatic state characterized by problems of memory of unassimilable experiences, perhaps with an organic basis. In the place of recollection, the patients displayed sometimes dramatic physical and emotional symptoms, whose origins could be reconstructed. Freud pursued a psychological explanation

for these conditions, at first emphasizing the delayed effect of childhood sexual abuse, which awaited puberty to achieve its full significance. Out of this work came his important notion of an unmanageable level of excitation that breaks through protective barriers (as a property of the nervous system) and the consequent splitting or fragmentation of the mind into dissociated parts.

Beginning with *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), Freud pointed to the importance of sexual repression in contemporary culture for the formation of neuroses. In his classic case reports, he argued that symptoms could be understood as indirect expressions of the conflict between forbidden wishes and prohibitions that could be discovered by interview methods. Although he began his investigations in a medical context, scholars now view these historical phenomena in social terms related to the changing status of women and the role of sexuality in bourgeois European life, rather than as purely individual disorders. The suffering person represents the product both of a unique private history and of complex developments in the wider society. Freud himself wrote throughout his life about these intertwined levels of trauma, but his major psychoanalytic theories gradually focused on the inner workings of the mind. In so doing, his attention turned from the causal importance of sexual abuse to the role of subjective sexual fantasies in neurosis.

World War I brought a heightened awareness of post-traumatic illnesses to psychiatrists confronted with the numerous military victims of shell-shock and combat stress. While the devastating consequences of combat on soldiers may have formerly been taken as implicit in the normativity of war or accepted as inevitable aspects of the presence of evil in human life, suddenly the human effects of military trauma became a pressing medical and social issue. Despite persistent resistance to the medical validity of post-traumatic conditions, the extent of the problem could not be ignored. Freud himself was forced to extend his explanations of trauma from the fate of sexual arousal and repression to the consequences of actual violence. His hypothesis of a pleasure principle governing mental life proved inadequate to explain the nightmares and repetitive patterns of action he saw in veterans, added to what

he considered a puzzling negative reaction to treatment in patients. Speculative quasi-biological theories like the existence of a death instinct, “beyond the pleasure principle” and the inheritance of ancestral memories of violence in his “primal horde” myth and, much later, his speculative reconstruction of the story of Moses, upended early psychoanalytic models of the mind. These theories of unconscious repetition and intergenerational transmission set the stage for the modern field of trauma studies, where questions of the interplay between individual and social factors persist. The classic Freudian psychobiology of intolerable instinctual excitation was set aside in favor of the meaning of events for the subject living within a specific social context. The subject’s mental well-being could no longer be separated from the group and culture in which it was embedded. Craps and Bond succeed in maintaining this dual perspective consistently, appreciating the real challenge of helping victims of traumatic experiences, while exploring the gradual reorientation of trauma studies towards social phenomena like the damaging effects of colonialism and racism on subjected peoples.

Psychiatric recognition of the importance of trauma remained closely linked to wartime experiences through World War II and Vietnam, whose veterans now gained political and medical support, for example, those in the Veterans Affairs (VA) hospital system. A reformulation of the framework enshrined in the official *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* gave legitimacy to the label Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which recognized the need for treatment of sufferers. At the same time, the diagnosis encouraged a further medicalization of patient care, reifying an illness that one “has” rather than a subjective state that is at least partially constructed by a cultural narrative. An individualized model brought resources to bear on patients, but may have obscured the political and moral dimensions of the meaning of the war for soldiers and its implications for underlying economic and social arrangements. A parallel series of developments occurred in the renewed attention to sexual violence and abuse inspired by the woman’s movements of the late 20th Century. PTSD became a diagnosis validating the importance of gendered trauma, much as in Freud’s early work, and similarly addressed

both individual cases and the social practices and inequalities that fostered them. Against the medical model of DSM grew what the authors describe as a literary conception of a wound culture redefining identity around forms of victimization.

In Chapter Two, Craps and Bond expand their social-historical approach through discussion of the philosophy and literature of the Holocaust, which gradually became a new paradigm for trauma studies. The Shoah once again bridged individual victimization (and demands for reparation) with ideological and political developments affecting an entire group. The important writings of Adorno, Benjamin, and Lyotard underlined the widespread sense of a serious crisis of modernity, of which Auschwitz became a powerful symbol. Literary theorists under the influence of the new paradigm of deconstruction, partially in the wake of the writings of Derrida, began to speak of the impossibility of mastering or even speaking about Holocaust trauma. In works of fiction as in human life, what remained psychically absent and unrepresented became the dominant feature of analysis. At centers like Yale University, these changes in academic approaches to literary studies were combined with psychoanalytic theories. Over the latter part of the 20th Century, the conceptual work of the Yale group—notably Caruth, Hartmann, Felman, and de Man—became dominant in trauma theory. Many of these authors participated importantly in the Yale Shoah project of recording interviews with survivors, under the leadership of the psychoanalyst Dori Laub. They argued that the structural effects of trauma compel a different form of reading or witnessing testimonies. Structurally absent experience (Caruth) and the impossibility of knowing “the real” (Felman) require a new therapeutic form of listening to survivors, although how that might actually work seemed vague. Felman’s adaptation of Lacanian theories of psychoanalysis privileged the presence of the unconscious through figurative language, ambiguity, and disruption of narrative, and made witnessing require a therapeutic encounter. The traumatized person became in this light a victim who was structurally unable to tell his story.

In Chapter Three, Craps and Bond deepen their discussion of the literary and philosophical approach to trauma elaborated by the Yale group and its critics. They focus particularly

on the writings of Caruth, as perhaps the most widely read of the post-modern literary theorists working in this area. Their explication of her extremely abstract conception is remarkably clear and balanced. As noted, Caruth presented trauma as not only a disruptive event but an-going crisis of survival and unclaimed experience. The survivor lives with an inaccessible psychic fragment that is literally unspeakable. As such, it can appear in action and interactions with witnesses, who may then share in a crisis of representation with wider ramifications for the culture. This perspective has been challenged in different ways. Craps and Bond make a good choice in presenting the criticisms of the historian La Capra, who takes a more reality-oriented approach to victims of specific events. LaCapra charges that the emphasis on structural absence lends a quasi-theological valorization to an endless repetition of unresolvable historical trauma. He views traumatic loss as the product of discrete historical events in the past that may be narrated, whereas a generalized discourse of absence defines an endless melancholy that conflates the roles of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders. In place of the psychoanalytic witness that emphasizes an impossible real known only through failures and gaps in narration, he proposed the position of “empathic unsettlement.” His original term evokes an alternative post-modern conception of a conversational (therapeutic) partner who remains both entangled and separate. These sections of the book will be of great interest to psychotherapists struggling with the considerable challenge of helping persons suffering with PTSD, as is so often the case.

The effects of vicarious witnessing of trauma through films, testimonies, or literature have become an important theme of the field. Hirsch’s work on “post-memory” has become an organizing concept for the transmission of memory across generations, also a significant contemporary psychoanalytic theme. Her writings describe the effect on witnesses of family photographs and pictorial novels like *Maus*, which refer to or represent implicit narratives of the Holocaust. Of course, much has been written of the descendants of survivors and the ways they may carry or recreate the previous generation’s traumatic history. Landsberg expanded this approach through the broader metaphor of “cultural memory.” Experiences like

the Holocaust, slavery, colonial oppression, and other forms of racism are conveyed to the world as mediated aspects of human experience potentially affecting everyone. On the negative side, these cultural experiences can lead to “fantasies of witnessing” that again blur the boundaries between the actual victims and vicarious participants. The epithet “Holocaust industry” labels some productions as a profitable exploitation of powerful renditions of history in which the focus becomes the responses of the viewer, rather than engagement with historical fact and its socio-political consequences. Hungerford echoes this criticism as a blurring of texts and actual lives. Yet, Craps and Bond insist on the value of artistic recreation as a powerful path toward a more genuine engagement with past suffering. The novelist Toni Morrison offers an exceptionally cogent example of the power of a literary (non-linear) treatment of history.

The topic of cultural or group unconscious transmission of trauma returns the authors to Freud’s speculations, notably in his fanciful recreation of *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) Freud’s much criticized late work holds value not so much as an accurate version of history but as a suggestion about ways historical events can play out over many generations. A less-noted example occurs in Freud’s essay “On Narcissism” (1914), which describes unconscious inheritance of the experiences of a group or family, alongside the more familiar unconscious influence of psycho-biological “drives.” Lacanian theorists have made much of this Freudian insight, emphasizing important signifiers or their absence in family discourse that pass on effects of trauma to descendants of victims. In the popular press, the internalized assumptions on current politics and attitudes towards military conflicts related to the Vietnam War’s defeat, for example, receive only sporadic treatment. Likewise, the lasting effects of Jim Crow and segregation intertwine with contemporary issues of African Americans in the United States, while often seeming ignored or denied. Perhaps these kinds of forgetting amount to the kind of cultural repression and reenactment of which Freud spoke.

In their final chapter, Craps and Bond take up four emerging directions in the future of trauma theory. First and already quite significant, the eurocentric background and assumptions of theorists have been questioned by many researchers. Appli-

cation of Western methods of treating trauma victims in other societies can short-circuit the cultural traditions and values of those affected and impose an unfamiliar set of principles that may lead to further harm. If cultural symbols and rituals provide meaning and cohesion, what the Italian psychologist Salvatore (2018) has called psycho-social resources for dealing with crises, then attention to what builds and supports them should be primary. The centrality of the Holocaust in studies by Caruth, La Capra, and many others may have inadvertently denied status to the chronic traumatic influences of colonialism, gendered oppression, and racism. Rothberg's conception of multi-dimensional memory has helped organize this complex issue. He argues against a competing model of trauma theories in favor of an interactive, inclusive approach in which different histories can be shared and used to promote solidarity across different societies. At the same time, he recognizes the potentially negative outcomes of exclusion and isolation of groups. One example of the positive might be the productive use of the Holocaust by non-European writers. Expanding the range of trauma histories, however, seems a worthwhile enterprise.

Beyond the centrality of the Shoah in the influential work of Caruth, Felman, Laub, and La Capra, the post-modern framework of trauma theory has come into question. Luckhurst has deplored its focus on anti-narrative and the impossible-to-represent real, suggesting the emerging creation of alternative narrative forms. Popular culture produces television interviews and fantasy films, even video games, that stimulate interactive engagement. Although easy to dismiss, these mass entertainments purvey an exposure to trauma that must have pervasive effects. Bond notes that the reciprocal use of trauma theory and literary creations to mutually reinforce their assumptions leads to an uncritical recycling of paradigms. Attention to alternative ways of writing and visualizing trauma have the potential to free the field from rigid formulae.

A more controversial development in trauma studies has been attention to the experiences of perpetrators. While seemingly obvious that learning about their motives and reactions deserves study, perpetrator research raises uncomfortable feelings about equating very different meanings of victimhood. Again Caruth has come in for criticism, notably by Leys for her

work in this area (her discussion of Tancred and Clorinda), and other authors have noted the inescapable moral judgments associated with the designation of victimhood. La Capra again has pointed out in rebuttal that the roles of perpetrator and victim do not define traumatization. Craps and Bond cite numerous films and novels that present perpetrators, referring as well to clinical work on veterans of Vietnam involved in atrocities. Lifton's study of My Lai and Shay's concept of a "moral injury" to participants in the war have contributed to bringing this dimension into greater light. Rothberg's notion of "the implicated subject" further expands the field to include a gamut of participants of various types, bystanders, and personal witnesses.

The final chapter introduces the recent, very evocative concept of future trauma, namely an anticipatory reaction to events that are perceived as likely to happen. Soldiers facing assignment to combat areas like Afghanistan offer a banal but important example of this predicament. It seems immediately apparent that anticipation structures many of the ways we organize our lives, and, when experienced as inexorable and threatening, our sense of the imminent future can have traumatic power. Perhaps most striking is the powerful contemporary concern with environmental disaster and climate change. Kaplan and others have written of climate trauma in books and films, but a sense of mounting anxiety about the crisis pervades popular and political discourse and has become part of the reality in which parents and teachers live every day. By implication, creating narratives about future trauma may represent the cutting edge of the field.

The conclusion presented by Craps and Bond brings together the many strands of this informative and thoughtful book. As an introduction to trauma theory and its applications to contemporary literary, artistic, and clinical work, the volume sets a high standard. It reminds us of the limitations of trauma studies as a dominant paradigm and exposes its controversies, while endeavoring to enlarge our understanding of this huge field. *Trauma* will be useful as an introduction for students who struggle with omnipresent and often confusing conceptions of trauma, but professionals and scholars could equally benefit from reading through its dense but clear summaries of a vast

array of sources. I recommend the book whole-heartedly to anyone with an interest or need to gain greater familiarity with the meaning and pervasiveness of trauma at this moment of history.

References

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