

AARON DEROSA

Cultural Trauma, Evolution, and America's Atomic Legacy in Silko's Ceremony

Psychological trauma has become a staple of literary theory over the past twenty years, making meaningful insights into works of literature and the time periods in which they were produced. This surge in interest in trauma, however, has led to difficult definitional questions about what constitutes trauma and who can claim to be traumatized. This difficulty is particularly evident in discussions of ›cultural‹ trauma that still relies predominately on psychological definitions. Dominick LaCapra drew our attention to this in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* when he warned scholars of conflating primary and secondary witnesses.

In this essay, I articulate a new theory of cultural trauma that invokes contemporary research on cultural evolution – specifically the work of Peter J. Richerson and Robert Boyd – to describe the effects of traumatogenic events on a community. This involves changing the metaphor used in our analyses from one in which culture is depicted as a person (with a collective memory, for instance) to a more fitting assessment of culture as transmissible information. Doing so prompts researchers to consider a new alignment of traumatic inheritances and satisfies La-

Capra's concern of doing violence to primary witnesses by stretching the definition of psychological trauma too broadly.

I take as a case study the American fear generated in response to the atomic bomb, as it affords the opportunity to analyze a community with no primary witnesses to the tragedies at Hiroshima and Nagasaki but with an overabundance of ›traumatized‹ individuals. However, rather than argue that Cold War Americans exhibited symptoms now diagnosable as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), I contend the atomic detonations prompted massive changes to the information transmitted between individuals. As these changes become codified in institutional policies, common parlance, and artistic productions like literature, they create a lasting condition within the United States. It is this persistent, maladaptive condition that I now term ›cultural trauma‹.

The essay ultimately turns to Leslie Marmon Silko's canonical novel *Ceremony* to show how one author articulates the process by which communities can be said to be traumatized, how cultural information is passed on, and how this can have a serious impact on the health and stability of a community. It is fitting that Silko's novel culminates in a final climactic scene outside the Jackpile Uranium Mine, one of the largest open pit uranium mines in the world, that she regards as the »point of convergence where the fate of all living things, and even the earth, had been laid«. Reading Silko's novel as a commentary for all ›non-Destroyer‹ communities – set against the atomic-armed Destroyer mentality of characters like Emo – I show how the atomic bomb has left a lasting impact on American culture. And above all, through this analysis, I differentiate cultural trauma from its psychological counterpart, and explore the implications for literary studies more broadly.

References

- Alexander, Jeffrey C., Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma, in: Jeffrey C. Alexander et al. (ed.), *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, Berkeley 2004, 1–30.
- Appel, Markus/Tobias Richter, Persuasive Effects of Fictional Narrative Increases Over Time, *Media Psychology* 10 (2007), 113–34.
- Arnold, Ellen L. (ed.), *Conversations with Leslie Marmon Silko*, Jackson 2000.
- Aunger, Robert, Human Communication as Niche Construction, in: Stephen Shennan (ed.), *Pattern and Process in Cultural Evolution*, Berkeley 2009, 33–44.
- Baider, Lea et al., Transmission of Response to Trauma? Second-Generation Holocaust Survivors' Reaction to Cancer, *American Journal of Psychiatry* 157 (2000), 904–910.
- Balaev, Michelle, Trends in Literary Trauma Theory, *Mosaic* 41:2 (2008), 149–166.
- Barash, David P./Judith Eve Lipton, *The Caveman and the Bomb: Human Nature, Evolution, and Nuclear War*, New York 1985.
- Borstelmann, Thomas, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena*, Cambridge 2003.
- Boyer, Paul, *Fallout: A Historian Reflects on America's Half-Century Encounter with Nuclear Weapons*, Columbus 1998.

- Brians, Paul, Chart of Trends in Nuclear War Fiction, *Nuke Pop*, <http://public.wsu.edu/~brians/nukepop/chart.html> (24. 6. 2011).
- Caruth, Cathy, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Baltimore 1996.
- Cosmides, Leda/John Tooby, Evolutionary Psychology: A Primer, *Center for Evolutionary Psychology* (1997), <http://www.psych.ucsb.edu/research/cep/primer.html> (24. 6. 2011).
- Cottrell, Jr., Leonard S./Sylvia Eberhart, *American Opinion on World Affairs in the Atomic Age*, New York 1969.
- Dissanayake, Ellen, What Art is and What Art Does: An Overview of Contemporary Evolutionary Hypotheses, in: Colin Martindale/Paul Locher/Vladimir M. Petro (ed.), *Evolutionary and Neurocognitive Approaches to Aesthetics, Creativity and the Arts*, Amityville, NY 2007, 1–14.
- Dudziak, Mary, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, Princeton 2000.
- Dutton, Denis, *The Art Instinct*, New York 2009.
- Erikson, Kai, *Everything in its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood*, New York 1976.
- Eyerman, Ron, Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity, in: Jeffrey C. Alexander et al. (ed.), *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, Berkeley 2004, 60–111.
- Gerrig, Richard, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading*, New Haven 1993.
- Hagedorn, Hermann, *The Bomb that Fell on America*, Santa Barbara 1946.
- Holmes, Emily A. et al., Can Playing the Computer Game 'Tetris' Reduce the Build-Up of Flashbacks for Trauma? A Proposal from Cognitive Science, *PLoS One* 4:1 (2009), <http://www.plosone.org/article/info:doi/10.1371/journal.pone.0004153> (20. 2. 2010).
- Jacobs, Connie A., A Toxic Legacy: Stories of Jackpile Mine, *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 28:1 (2004), 41–52.
- Klein, Kitty, Narrative Construction, Cognitive Processing, and Health, in: David Herman (ed.), *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*, Stanford 2003, 56–84.
- LaCapra, Dominick, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Baltimore 2001.
- , *History and its Limits: Human, Animal, Violence*, Ithaca 2009.
- LaDuke, Winona/Ward Churchill, Native America: The Political Economy of Radioactive Colonialism, *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 13:3 (1985), 107–32.
- Lakoff, George/Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* [1980], Chicago 2003.
- Lewis, Tom, *Divided Highways*, New York 1997.
- Leys, Ruth, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, Chicago 2000.
- Luckhurst, Roger, *The Trauma Question*, London 2008.
- Mesoudi, Alex/Andrew Whiten/Kevin N. Laland, Towards a Unified Science of Cultural Evolution, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 29 (2006), 329–383.
- Moore, Ernest Eugene/David V. Feliciano, *Trauma*, New York 2000.
- Richerson, Peter J./Robert Boyd, *Not by Genes Alone*, Chicago 2005.
- Rothschild, Babette, *The Body Remembers: The Psychophysiology of Trauma and Trauma Treatment*, New York 2000.
- Satterlee, Michelle, Landscape Imagery and Memory in the Narrative of Trauma: A Closer Look at Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 13:2 (2006), 73–92.

- Shennan, Stephen, Pattern and Process in Cultural Evolution, in: Stephen Shennan (ed.), *Pattern and Process in Cultural Evolution*, Berkeley 2009, 1–18.
- Silko, Leslie Marmon, *Ceremony*, New York 1977.
- , A Conversation with Leslie Marmon Silko [Interview by Larry Evers and Denny Carr], in: Ellen L. Arnold (ed.), *Conversations with Leslie Marmon Silko*, Jackson 2000, 10–21.
- , Stories and Their Tellers – A Conversation with Leslie Marmon Silko [Interview by Dexter Fisher], in: Ellen L. Arnold (ed.), *Conversations with Leslie Marmon Silko*, Jackson 2000, 22–28.
- , *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today*, New York 1996.
- Smelser, Neil J., Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma, in: Jeffrey C. Alexander et al. (ed.), *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, Berkeley 2004, 31–59.
- Solomon, Z./M. Kotler/M. Mikulincer, Combat-Related Posttraumatic Stress Disorder among Second-Generation Holocaust Survivors: Preliminary Findings, *American Journal of Psychiatry* 145 (1988), 865–868.
- Strange, Jeffrey J., How Fictional Tales Wag the Real-World Beliefs: Models and Mechanisms of Narrative Influence, in: Melanie C. Green/Jeffrey J. Strange/Timothy C. Brock (ed.), *Narrative Impact: Social and Cognitive Foundations*, Mahwah 2002.
- Truman, Harry S., Draft of a White House Press Release, Statement by the President of the United States, ca. August 6 1945, *Harry S. Truman Library & Museum*, http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/bomb/small/mb10.htm (20.2.2010).
- Yehuda, Rachel/Sarah L. Halligan/Robert Grossman, Childhood Trauma and Risk for PTSD: Relationship to Intergenerational Effects of Trauma, Parental PTSD, and Cortisol Excretion, *Development and Psychopathology* 13 (2001), 733–753.

Full-length article in: JLT 6/1 (2012), 41–64.

How to cite this item:

Abstract of: Aaron DeRosa, Cultural Trauma, Evolution, and America's Atomic Legacy in Silko's *Ceremony*.

In: JLTonline (20.02.2012)

Persistent Identifier: urn:nbn:de:0222-002034

Link: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0222-002034>