

Re-imagining Healing after Trauma: Leslie Marmon Silko and Judith Butler Writing against the War of Cultures.

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In this essay, I want to deal with contemporary traumatic issues at play mainly in the work of Judith Butler and Leslie Marmon Silko who are, in more ways than one, theorists of trauma, though they are not officially acknowledged as such. By doing so, I want to continue the work of the few trauma theorists and writers (Cathy Caruth and Jacques Derrida among others) who have pointed out the relationships between traumatized individuals across cultures and time (without erasing the specificity of their traumas). They have done so through an analysis of problematic institutional systems of knowing, thinking, and believing that serve to produce and maintain cultural trauma, and promote, in veiled ways, cultural separation and racism. Both Butler and Silko continue this analysis in their work.

In this essay, I will address, from the perspective of these two thinkers who both belong to so-called “minority groups,” two historical moments (WWII and 9/11) -- the performative power and ethicopolitical potential of which, work to critique nationalist discourses that promote individual and cultural trauma. I also want to point out the potential for cultural connection or reconnection between traumatized individuals and/or cultures through an analysis of the role played by death—which might seem a bit unusual—in making these connections. These conversations will help me rethink trauma outside the boundaries of conventional trauma theory, and thus bring forth new, rather localized theories of trauma.

Native-American writer (and, in my books, trauma theorist) Leslie Marmon Silko’s treatment of trauma in her two novels *Ceremony* and *Almanac of the Dead* supersedes the well-known theories about trauma developed by contemporary figures such as Jacques Lacan or

Cathy Caruth. In her texts, Silko brings forth the historical value of the cultural metaphor of the web (a crucial symbol in Laguna cosmology) to assert the non-singularity of trauma's representability, the interdependency of certain traumatic stories and traumatized bodies, the building or re-building of connections between these traumatized bodies through a critique of dangerous systematic and symbolic interventions in the healing process, and the redefinition of death as a new starting point (though a rather morbid one) in the process of building human connections (with one's own lost cultural matrix or between enemy cultures). In short, Silko participates in the process of rethinking and reshaping trauma theory.

As mentioned above, another important theorist of trauma comes to join Silko in my forthcoming critique of conventional trauma theory and its processes: Judith Butler, who is better known as a queer theorist than a theorist of trauma. The juxtaposition of the work of queer theorist Judith Butler and the work of Native fiction writer Leslie Marmon Silko might appear as an unlikely combination for the connection between these authors is not obvious. However, this juxtaposition is crucial to my project since I want to participate in the process of connection-making between cultural and political entities that have remained separated. These two writers of trauma have never been linked to each other; they are not quoted nor simply mentioned in the same literary or theoretical spaces; and they have not been associated directly to the field of trauma studies but can do much to widen the scope of that field. Here, I am only making visible an already existing connection between two areas, and more specifically two authors (Butler and Silko) who are promoting a connection between cultural groups—in their respective dealings with trauma.

Butler and Silko are important contemporary theorists of trauma because, in the texts I will be analyzing, both authors critique the ways in which certain systems of thinking or believing

defined as universal/transhistorical (not to say ahistorical), as well as the symbols that are contained within these systems, can do much damage to an individual, a community, a nation victim of trauma. When I address the issue of trauma, when I write about its characteristics, representations, consequences, etc., I do so “in context.” A trauma is specific and localized and needs specific and localized responses; it needs cures that take into account that specificity and locality. Already known universalized and Eurocentric metropolitan trauma theories and curative practices cannot become the imposed uncritical answer (though they can participate in thinking through that answer, that cure) to a problem that is localized elsewhere (not in Europe, not in the metropolitan theoretical centers). Butler addresses this issue in the context of 9/11, and Silko addresses it in the context of the Native-American involvement in WWII. Not only do both authors bring forward the need to think about traumas in terms of their connectedness to each other in order to foster cultural understanding, but they also write against any universal, symbolic system of knowledge that presents itself as the cure for a very specific, localized trauma. Both authors redefine ways of coping with trauma that move away from the popular systematic responses to trauma we know (medical, governmental and religious interventions are probably making the loudest and more brusque statements about what the responses to a trauma should be). Both authors, in rather morbid ways, see death as a connecting point between individuals and cultures that have learned to hate a constructed enemy that should not be one. Both authors provoke nationalist trauma narratives and deconstruct the racist lies that compose these narratives, in more or less veiled ways.

Re-theorizing Trauma Theory: The Crucial Movement from the Symbolic to the Historical in the Process of Reconnection and Reparation after Trauma

In Laguna cosmology, Spider Woman also known as Thought Woman is the creatrix, the story-teller, the weaver of the web of life: “Thought-Woman, the spider, named thing and as she named them they appeared” (*Ceremony* 1). Weaving and telling are intricately linked in Laguna cosmology, and this spirit being who is at the same time animal and human, weaves the web of human history, which is also her history. Silko’s *Ceremony* opens with this story, the story of Thought Woman the spider who is thinking the narrative that follows (here Silko herself is the spider). The story is the journey of Tayo, a young Laguna Pueblo, a mixed-blood born of a Laguna mother and a white father, who comes back from WWII with what any Western traditional medical body would recognize as PTSD (Post-traumatic Stress Disorder). Within the context of that war and that of the fighting in the Philippines Tayo participated in, the specific trauma Tayo seems to suffer from is the death of his brother Rocky killed by Japanese soldiers, a death which Tayo was powerless to prevent. We begin the novel thinking that the trauma of WWII will remain through out the novel the uber-trauma, a symbolic trauma around which human history comes to attach itself without ever threatening its overbearing historical position.

Quickly enough, however, Silko moves beyond the specific/symbolic traumatic moment which seems to stand at the origin of Tayo’s suffering, and connects this “originary moment” to a multitude of other moments in order to recreate the traumatic web Tayo will learn to see, with all its connections, so that his healing process can start (and never end). Tayo’s traumatic web is intermingled with the web of life, the web of human history. Thought Woman the spider weaves through story-telling; the telling of new human stories based on the old myths, connected to the past but in a constant state of evolution. Thought woman the spider, a spirit being in Laguna

cosmology, is also a human figure and appears throughout the text in the shape of characters: Auntie, The Night Swan, The Katsina Spirit Tse and Betonie the medicine man. They all share Thought Woman's story-telling power and are responsible for weaving the web of life, adding stories to it that either complicate Tayo's traumatic web or disentangle it. These characters are often found pulling threads from the fabric of their clothes when they are about to tell a story. These threads help make visible, deconstruct, and make meaning out of Tayo's traumatic web simply by narrativizing certain traumatic instances, by uncovering/revealing to him certain lines and trends connected to each other that make the traumatic web Tayo wants to disentangle. Tayo, through the process of listening to the medicine man (Betonie)'s stories, songs, ceremonial words, remembers them and remembers the existence of the web of history, a return of memory that takes place through, and not against, repetition. Repetition is not a symptom of trauma but the way towards remembering; it needs to become compulsory because it has the power to save lives. The stories belong to the phenotype (properties both cultural and structural) of Native-American cultures and individuals. They are structural, they are symbolic, but they are the language that is made and remade by history, and that creates and recreate social beings according to the changes brought about by social change. Their origin, their nature, is diffuse and unstable. They are composed of multiple layers, more or less archaic traces of versions of stories that have been modified, transformed by history. They are historical/social because they constantly evolve with time, but they are also timeless. Their evolution, it should be noted, takes place through death as their modification comes as a response to the infringement of a violent other upon Laguna culture.

Old Ku'oosh, the first Laguna medicine man to take care of Tayo after his return from the Veteran hospital, fails in his endeavor to cleanse Tayo from his sickness as Ku'oosh uses

traditional stories in order to do so, stories that speak a language which cannot cure what it does not know, what it cannot name. The structure of the old Laguna language Ku'oosh uses is powerless in front of events "too alien to comprehend" (*Ceremony* 36); an understanding of these events is unavailable through Ku'oosh's language, thus his cures are without effect since they rely on songs and stories cut off from history, with only a symbolic/mythical value. Ku'oosh, however, represents the first step in the process of disentanglement as he speaks to Tayo using the old Laguna dialect, "full of sentences that were involuted with explanations of their own origins, as if nothing the old man said were his own but all had been said before and he was only there to repeat it" (*Ceremony* 34). Ku'oosh reiterates the argument that the past speaks through the present. This repetition, however, takes place without a difference and is significant of the non productive, even dangerous, argument that assimilation has kept Native cultures static or has erased their cultural potential through Christianization and the imposition of the >language of the enemy'. The supposedly >disappeared' cultural core of the Laguna nation, according to this argument, is the gap that can never be bridged, a historical loss that turns into symbolic lack and becomes the very root of ignorant discourses that claim the disintegration or degeneration of Native culturesCa very racist argument which materializes in Silko's description of the Gallup Ceremonial, a celebration of Native-culture organized by "the white men there" (*Ceremony*, 116), a ceremony during which tourists buy Native-American jewels from Indians who perform their culture for the entertainment of those same tourists. In the context of that ceremony, Indians are in fact the attraction to be purchased. Their culture becomes commodified by White Americans. It is turned into a crystallized spectacle to be taken as symbolic of Indianness—a concept thus deprived of its social and political dimensions.

Ku'oosh also tells Tayo that as one speaks, as one tells a story or performs a ceremony through story-telling, "No word exists alone, and the reason for choosing each word had to be explained with a story about why it must be said this certain way. That was the responsibility that went with being human, old Ku'oosh said, the story behind each word must be told so there could be no mistake in the meaning of what had been said" (*Ceremony* 35-6). These words are both symptoms and sites of trauma: symptoms of trauma because their repetition without a difference testifies to the traditional Laguna language's unfortunate irrelevance in a contemporary context, and sites of trauma because Tayo's limited comprehension of Ku'oosh's traditional Laguna language further entangles the traumatic web and thus sets him apart from the web of history. However, Ku'oosh's comment is positive despite Ku'oosh's traumatic repetition of the old language since it implies that the linguistic monads that stories are become part of a web of meaning that comes together through the recovery of the past, the recovery of a history re-imagined not in relation to what has been lost, but in relation to what indeed remains but has been erased, forgotten, or misinterpreted. Here, "the story behind each word," the Laguna community's story of coming to mean, coming to be, opens the way towards an understanding of the stories made out of the accumulation and repetition of other versions of these stories. They come to mean through the past remembered, rehistoricized from the perspective of the victim who turns into victor through the recuperation and resignification of traumatic moments, of what has been; and thus through their reentry into the circles of signifiers that compose history.

The stories in Silko's novel are sacred, thus symbolic (they are part of the cultural unconscious and regiment the behavior of the group and the self within that group); and secular, thus historical. They make and unmake, create and destroy, their performative power is without limits and they tell, they speak "humanity" (meaning that they give birth to it again at every

telling) as much as they are spoken by it. Both their symbolic and historical impact can only be preserved through repetition, however. This repetition, though traumatic in the context of old Ku'oosh's linguistic work, becomes performative in Betonie's world. The repetition of words and stories, the repetition of history itself, is not symptomatic of trauma, but becomes a challenge to trauma.

In *The Uncanny*, Nicholas Royle writes, "To repeat: the uncanny seems to be about a strange repetitiveness. It has to do with the return of something repressed, something no longer familiar, the return of the dead, the >constant recurrence of the same thing" (84). As Tayo struggles to regain balance by disentangling spider webs, the repetition of stories loses its Freudian sense as it moves away from Freud's repetition compulsion, a symptom of sickness and regression according to Freudian theory. It becomes a sign of overcoming trauma. It is not instinctive, it is not elementary as Freud would have it, because it is a consequence, not an origin. It came as the result of acculturation. This repetition is not primitive and unconscious, but conscious and desired. It becomes the condition for personal and cultural reparation according to Silko. It is the Freudian death drive resignified, partly "desymbolized" and rehistoricized, that comes to counter cultural death, and thus puts itself in the service of history, in the service of life. As Tayo listens to the stories repeated by Betonie, The Night Swan or Auntie, the structural/symbolic and the genealogical/historical come together to reminisce about the past and make it mean in the present, unveil its presence in the circles of the traumatic web. The symbolic order Laguna words and stories belong to in the world of Ku'oosh, loses its autonomy and is dragged back down into history, into the "symbolhistorical" of Laguna people whose cultural imaginary renews itself through this process of rehistoricizing language by taking into account the world around, Laguna or not, and the changes that take place in it. Remembering and

understanding cultural specificity and difference is thus the direct consequence of remembering history as a global, web-like phenomenon which involves a multitude of stories.

The Laguna traumatic web, which is part of the web of history, is composed of a multiplicity of stories that are linked together through one individual, Tayo, in this particular context of the novel. Tayo eventually sees all the points of junction between the words and stories he heard: Rocky's death and Tayo's sickness are linked, but not in the way Tayo had thought. They are only two elements in the traumatic web which do not function as autonomous traumas but need to be linked to others: the war, acculturation, the cursing of the rain, the Pueblo community's loss of balance, Tayo's loss of language, etc. Tayo's originary trauma is in fact non-existent. It is constructed through the Western desire to symbolize, not synthesize. To rely on it is unproductive and ultimately dangerous as its forced autonomy, its detachment from the complicated web of history, prevents a kaleidoscopic envisioning of trauma, as well as the beginning of mourning: if trauma is somewhat swallowed by the symbolic order, then trauma is beyond mourning. Silko refuses symbolization by multiplying the possibilities for thinking the origin of trauma as non-existent because multiple, untraceable in a straight line, in time and timeless, in space and beyond any kind of spatial restriction. She also describes death as the story that needs to be told and retold so as to counter narratives/stories which promote the repetition of convenient, familiar, and supposedly convincing symbols that should help Tayo heal. These symbolic/sacred stories turn out unproductive, not to say dangerous, because when used alone, they erase the human/historical characteristics of Tayo's trauma. They erase the materiality of death, history, trauma. However, Tayo eventually finds its place again in the web of history; he understands his connectedness to an enemy who was constructed as such in the context of warfare (he remembers seeing, in the face of a Japanese man, the facial features of his beloved

dead uncle); and he is allowed to remember that death, fear, and pain connect him to this constructed enemy. The very symbols that prevented him from healing then become obsolete.

Silko's *Almanac*: Deconstructing the Western Lie with and through the Dead

In *Ceremony*, Silko defines both trauma and history as intermingled webs in the midst of which individual lives can become interconnected despite their cultural or national status. Silko brings the notions of autonomy and community together in advancing an argument for relationality in the words of Judith Butler, helping us think about the ways in which "we are not only constituted by our relations but also disposed by them as well" (*Precarious Lives* 24). The concept of connectedness between human stories and histories is a theme that Silko takes up again in *Almanac of the Dead*. Building connections between personal, historical, and cultural traumas is here again Silko's main purpose.

The novel is divided into six parts: the first four refer to four traditional geographical areas of the world from the specific to the continental (The United States of America, Mexico, Africa and The Americas). The fifth refers to a theoretical concept that brings down national borders and geopolitical separations: "the Fifth World," world in which Native tribes have taken their lands back from the territories we know today as nations, without worrying about notions of nation and citizenship. The last part of the novel is entitled "One World, Many Tribes" and outlines this reorganization of the geographical and political map Silko wants to achieve in her work. Can organization not according to nations and national borders but according to tribal communities which show their autonomy and relationality in the (one might say unrealistic) process of recovering the land and the lives that were theirs before colonial time, an awakening in or from the other through trauma and through death.

The events of the book revolve around a specific geographical location, Tucson Arizona, and move away from it to connect it with other areas of the U.S. and Mexico where the series of events and stories of the book take place and are told. The first two pages of the book form a map. At the center of the map, Tucson is represented by a thick dot towards which arrows are pointed, arrows coming from all directions, different cities, in the U.S. and in Mexico. Beneath that dot, a straight horizontal line makes a clear cut on the map and marks the frontier between Mexico, the name written in large letters under the line, and the U.S. which, interestingly enough, is not named on the map. These arrows joined in Tucson delimit geographical segments and the names of the novel's characters, more than 50 of them, inhabit these segments, sometimes appearing twice as the events of the novel take them to different areas of the map. All these characters with different and related stories, traumatic histories, are major actors in the complicated and interrelated events of the novel.

On the right of the map towards the middle and next to the dot that marks the emplacement of Tucson, we read, "Tucson, Arizona. Home to an assortment of speculators, confidence men, embezzlers, lawyers, judges, police and other criminals, as well as addicts and pushers, since the 1880s and the Apache Wars" (*Almanac* 15). On the map, Tucson appears not as a point of origin, but as a meeting place, a place of death, a traumatic knot, a vortex of trauma in which characters and stories are swallowed, spit out and swallowed back again to form a web of meaning around what comes to be the central element of the novel: the almanac itself and its notebooks.

On the top left-hand corner of the map, we read, "Almanac of the dead, Five hundred year map. Through the decipherment of ancient tribal texts of the Americans the Almanac of the Dead foretells the future of all the Americas. The future is encoded in arcane symbols and old narratives" (*Almanac* 14). The almanac is not only an archive for the past, but also already an

archive of the future. Lecha, grand-daughter of a Yaqui woman who used to be the keeper of the almanac and who transmitted this inheritance to her grand-child, describes its potential power: “those old almanacs don’t just tell you when to plant or harvest, they tell you about the days yet to come—drought or flood, plague, civil war or invasion . . . Once the notebooks are transcribed, I will figure out how to use the old almanac. Then we will foresee the months and years to come—everything” (*Almanac* 137). Through a translation of the past, the almanac will reveal the future. The notebooks are key elements in performing that translation in time; they are the repository of stories and histories, and are always in the process of being read and written. As a matter of fact, the notebooks are fragmented and need to be mended. This mending, this re-weaving of the notebooks will take place through a translation of the preserved stories which come in a foreign language and sometimes are encrypted, made of signs the meaning of which is impossible to unveil if parts of the manuscript are missing. The stories do not mean autonomously; they mean when put in relation with each other. This mending will also take place through the recuperation of lost passages, lost stories that will come from afar as Yoeme points out: “the story may arrive with a stranger, a traveler thrown out of his home country months ago. Or the story may be brought by an old friend . . . But after you hear the story, you and the others prepare by the new moon to rise up against the slave masters” (*Almanac* 578). Each new story is a puzzle piece added to the notebooks, a new thread entering the web of history always already in constant evolution. Stories are sites of revolution, performative and prophetic elements which come together to disturb the flow of Western white narratives of violence and death, elements which “reckon with the past because within it lay seeds of the present and future (*Almanac* 311). This reckoning is needed but dangerous because the risk of listening to the wrong stories is always a possibility as Yoeme teaches Lecha: “Nothing must be added that was not already there. Only

repairs are allowed, and one might live as long as I have and not find a suitable code” (*Almanac* 129). The “already there” alludes to the unveiling of the past, of erased truths, different truths from the ones offered by traditional logocentric and ubertraumatic Western historical narratives which justify or ignore deadly violence done onto some under claims of freedom and democracy for others. This past history is recuperated by Silko through out *Almanac*, and whoever comes in the way of this recuperation is punished, found guilty of “crimes against history” (516).

These “other truths” are moments of departures from which to rethink history. Only through the recovery of erased stories and histories can one make sense of the notebooks which are sacred but not static; the stories evolve, are told and retold, and this retelling performs changes in the present and future: “Yoeme had believed power resides with certain stories; the power ensures the story to be retold, and with each retelling a slight but permanent shift took place” (*Almanac* 581). The following words are found on one of the pages of the notebook: “Sacred time is always in the present” (*Almanac* 136). The sacred is a key a site of trauma. As I discussed earlier, myths and symbols are oftentimes dangerous since they keep history immobile, they transfix it, they crystallize it. Here, however, the notebooks do not have the status of a sacred manuscript in the Christian sense. As a matter of fact, the notebooks are a part of history and keep telling it. They have a symbolic role in the sense that they are the teachings of the Aztec sacred snake, but its teachings are rooted in history; they already speak of and warn humanity against the desire for death and violence, and they will really come to mean only when the lost fragments of the notebooks have been replaced. A replacement which slowly takes place through human intervention, the replacement of the lost stories of the dead by the stories of the living which recall these lost fragments. The historical and the mythical/symbolic (which becomes

historical) are warped and weaved together to form a new version of history. The notebooks thus foster the process of awakening to the death and suffering of erased bodies and cultures, to their vulnerability as Butler would put it. This awakening happens through death, through the exposition of violence as both structural and historical, an issue I will discuss in depth in the paragraphs to come.

9/11: From Cultural Separation to the Possibility for Connectedness between Nations

As Judith Butler asks in her discussion of bodily politics, and, more specifically, in her examination of the relationship between individuality and community in dealing with issues of legal and political representations of certain bodies (individual, cultural, social, etc.), “if I build a notion of autonomy on the basis of the denial of . . . a primary and unwilled physical proximity with others, then do I precisely deny the social and political conditions of my embodiment in the name of autonomy?” (*Undoing Gender*, 21). She continues, “If I am struggling for autonomy, do I need to be struggling for something else as well, a conception of myself, as invariably in community, impressed upon by others, impressing them as well, and in ways that are not always clearly delineable, in forms that are not fully predictable?” (21-2). The answer to this last question can be and should be positive. To continue with Butler’s words, “We are compelled to speak of the human, and of the international” (37). In the context of discussions on trauma, we are compelled to speak about certain traumatized bodies and point out the specificity of their traumas, but we are also compelled to prevent their unhealthy and unproductive pedestalization in the field of trauma studies, as well as the further hierarchization of traumas. We are also compelled to look at trauma globally (but democratically as Butler would write) and see how certain global or universal notions and theories of trauma can function across nations and time,

pending their rethinking in certain cases; and how other theories do not and should be critiqued for wanting to pass as global, democratic theories. Thus, specific traumatic moments can act as shifters, showing the plural character of trauma, its specificity as well as its globality, its autonomy as well as its co-dependence with history. Lately, it seems as though the concern and desire for traumatic autonomy has conveniently erased the performative power of arguments that promote the co-dependence of nations as well as more global, collective, web-like notions of trauma. “The global” has come to mean danger partly because this global enemy that is terrorism has severely wounded the American people in a very specific way: the so-called “origin” of the terrorist wound in the US, more specifically in the American popular imaginary, is the 9/11 event. The grieving process of America has been kept static by the promotion of a desirable fear for this “global enemy” which sometimes takes a human shape, and consequently the promotion of the kind of violenceCa war waged against a visible enemyCthat participates in maintaining that immobility. This blind and dangerously static state of grief is completely erasing the problematic policies of a government which uses and abuses the grief of its own people in order to tyrannize another. The governmental purpose here is not even the transference of grief upon “a visible enemy” so as to relieve the American nation, which though troubling and unreasonable, could be humanly understandable. The purpose here is to reinforce a trauma (the wound to America) and perform another (the war in Iraq as democratic project which inscribes itself in the global war waged against terrorism) in the name of nationalism, or should we say racism, and this to preserve and spread the values of “Western democracy.” The present conservative government in America is widening the gap between two already dissentious cultures (“the West” and “the Middle-East,” two problematic categories created and pitted against each other through the promotion of cultural difference in the American media among other places), and too

many stand behind the government's traumatic policies. Others, however, are choosing to move beyond the false governmental rhetoric of freedom and want to uncover the oppressiveness of Western democratic systems as defined and imposed by governmental powers. These "others" have already found common grounds between the American trauma and the Iraqi trauma, two traumas which are of course entangled, which have come to signify governmental terrorism (both in the shape of an Eastern governmental dictatorship and a relentless American imperialist sweep across the world).

Within that context, death and grief might be the very human elements that will foster reconciliation between individuals of the same nation and different cultures. Sadly enough, death is our global common ground, our linking thread. The rapprochement between cultures can become possible if a connection between common traumatic experiences takes place, the common points being death and governmental violence. Unfortunately, the common arguments that promote the sacredness of life and the fight for the greater good through peaceful change seem to have no weight in the balance of justice today. Our understandings of death, then, must be the answer for a reconciliation of fates across borders.

Healing through Death: Contemporary Issues of Survival and the Role of Collective Understanding across National Borders

Today, the questions we see raised in newspapers and magazines worldwide--in the work of contemporary writers such as queer theorist Judith Butler (in *Precarious Lives*), political analyst Nafeez Ahmed (in *The War on Freedom*), or polemical film-maker Michael Moore, to name only a few—are the following: why does violence against the West happens, and what are the conditions under which violence appears? This appeal to the critical mind has often been synonymous to sedition after 9/11 since a clear cut choice, no questions entailed, was demanded

of Americans by a government employing a rhetoric of “good” versus “evil.” A majority still seems to refuse the condemnation of violence in all its forms and is ready to accept so-called ethical justifications for violence committed onto innocent others in response to violence committed onto the American people. In order to break that cycle of violence, humanist critical thinking, though useful, does not seem to be the best weapon to fight off fear, hatred, and the desire for revenge. What could, then, if not death? I was astonished to turn on the TV shortly before the 2004 American elections, and read a headline at the bottom of the screen that said that a group of parents of soldiers who had died in Iraq were supporting President Bush in his “fight against terror.” These supporters are still rather vocal today. It is understandable that in order to grieve a child and keep living beyond her death, parents need to find solace in knowing that this death happened for a very good reason. Their holding on to that reason might be one way of mourning the child. Hence families holding onto governmental discourses about the worthiness of the cause for which these men and women died. On the one hand, we need to acknowledge the parents’ suffering and their response to the death of their child; we want to understand and accept their justification because they have a right to cope with grief as well as they humanly can. But on the other hand, we can ask ourselves whether this grieving response unfortunately promotes the continuation of violence, whether the parents of a dead child who support the continuing governmental actions in Iraq will ever be able to mourn in peace. Their mourning is taking place through violence, in the context of relentless death. For that reason, one can wonder if mourning can really take place, or if it will remain absent, as absent as the critical voice that could have afforded these parents an outlet for anger and grief, as absent as the need to historicize the death of their child so that her dead body does not become food for the cannibalistic governmental discourse of braveness and dutiful behavior to a nation—a discourse which turns human lives

into symbolic deaths. What will be left to the parents of a dead child when the war is over, when dead bodies are counted and families are thanked and honored for their gift to the nation? Only a symbol (the heroic child and soldier) which will eventually be destroyed or conveniently forgotten as the international community and a portion of the American people will keep pointing a guilty finger towards the American government and those on its side. Who can mourn a fallen symbol? Isn't this symbolization of the dead one more traumatic event as it involves the creation and spreading of immaterial, ahistorical narratives of heroism **BAairy** narratives that make parents fall victim to "the loss of access to the terms that establish historical veracity" (*Undoing Gender* 156)? How long will this symbolic justification suffice for these parents who have lost a precious life, that of a human deprived of her place in their lives and her place in history through symbolization, through her entry into the mythical space of false ethics and pseudo-democratic values? This gift of death to the nation is the wrong one. The historical presence of the American soldiers who died and will die at war in Iraq should be preserved, their stories told, their faces remembered. These lives can be historicized in a productive way: not as the victims of a violence perpetrated by the constructed enemy of a nation, but as the victims of a violence that does not have a specific origin but a long history, as the victims of a violence that implicates not one nation, one people, but a web of events and decisions taken in the past by governmental powers that led to war. The intervention in the web of history of the stories of returning fighters (dead or hurt) can sentence to death governmental rhetoric of the symbolic hero. Then a productive, life-bearing gift of death can be offered not just to one nation, but to a community of people across the world. This gift of death is a version of Derrida's gift of death, an absolute duty towards the other that "demands that one behave in an irresponsible manner (by means of treachery and betrayal)" (*The Gift of Death* 66) and sacrifice ethics to be ethical. We

sometimes have to fail willingly in fulfilling our responsibility to our nation or our—a responsibility outlined by our government as the people’s duty to fear the outside and die for the good of the nation—in order to succeed in our responsibility towards the human lives that compose that same nation. Like Antigone, we need to reach the limit of Até, to become “dead in life” (*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 271), to counter unethical discourses that pass as ethical, deadly decisions taken in the name of life (and whose life?), by refusing to associate ourselves with narratives that promote death in the name of the state, death in the name of nationalism, the death of a constructed enemy who is not one: “to refuse this cycle of revenge in the name of justice, means not only to seek legal redress for wrongs done, but to take stock of how the world has become formed in this way precisely in order to form it anew, and in the direction of non-violence” (*Precarious Lives* 17). In order to accomplish that transformation, one needs to start with death. But before a productive gift of death can be made, the literal death of children is going to happen to American families as the violence of the war in Iraq escalates. We are not to remain autonomous bodies or autonomous communities when we are traumatized. 9/11 is not just the trauma of America. It has become everyone’s on different levels. It has become Iraqi, and theirs has now become ours through the event of the war. To think about human communities and their interconnection through death might be the first step towards eradicating violence, contradictorily enough. The death of Rocky is part of a web of events that produce Tayo’s trauma. This death is also at the root of Tayo’s reconnection with his cultural past, present, and future, and his realization that his enemy is not in fact the one pointed out and constructed as a symbol of evil by his government (the Japanese), but this very process of symbolization, and thus dehumanization, performed by his own nation.

Violence and Death: the Cement of history

Death is central to life according to psychoanalytical theory. Whether or not we agree with psychoanalytical theories about death, we can all take that statement, “death is central to life,” more than seriously. Freud saw death as the drive, through which all desires were expressed, and this death drive appears as a symptom of an individual’s autonomy; it marks her separation from the other. For Freud, the death drive was an instinct at the core of the structure of every being, of its biology, its “nature,” hence preceding symbolization¹. For Lacan, however, it is an expression of the symbolic order which regulates humanity’s being in the world²; it is thus an index of humanity’s relatedness, but a relatedness that is not sufficiently grounded in history by Lacanian psychoanalysis. What I want to do here is move away from a Freudian definition of death as individual instinctive drive, look at the ways in which death is indeed (though in ways that are problematic) part of the symbolic structure of being and grouping, and point out its crucial “forgotten” presence as the tangible, material stuff of history.

Death is synonymous to life. It belongs to the continuum, or should I say the web of history. There is no history without death. There is no being without death, whether it is being in the world or being symbolically speaking. As a matter of fact, death is also symbolic in the sense that it is present in theory in every event, every sequence of history, every moment of living, every trace of life, and every movement we make as individuals or as groups. Death is a haunting presence/absence, and in particular historical contexts, events or people can become agents of

1 See Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

2 For more development on Lacan’s inclusion of death in the symbolic order, see the translation of his *Écrits* on the function and field of speech and language in psychoanalysis. London: Tavistock, 1977. 102-104.

death and be dehistoricized to enter the memorial symbolic (which is of course oftentimes a dangerous occurrence) space of history—a space separated from the actual “historical.”

Death is therefore symbolic and historical, structural and cultural. It is the stuff (not the origin, not the end) of human evolution; it is the stuff of life. Death intervenes recurrently in the making and unmaking of nations, cultural and social groups, or simply autonomous individuals. The most “innocent,” unthought of aspects of our lives, the very norms and laws we need to follow to remain in place in the world, to belong, to be coherent social beings, are deadly in the sense that in order to survive socially, we need to “hurt ourselves,” to subdue or eliminate the disruptive elements about us that threaten the norm, and thus threaten our place in a regulated world. If we do not abide by the rules of normativity, the risk of social—and sometimes even literal--death becomes real, no matter how “democratic” and “protective of human rights” the nation in which we live is. However, as a whole, the social beings we are tend to think about norms and laws as tools towards reaching a greater good for humanity—a world with less violence, less death, more happy living. Contradictorily enough, this journey towards the greater good which is not always one involves violence and death. Butler extends that argument to describe the normative as deadly coercion, as death itself (*Undoing Gender* 206). Death is what we know, and we know of it differently according to where we stand in the social sphere. But it always means something to us, no matter who we are. We know the risk of social death if we are not ready to enter or remain in the normative social sphere in which we are expected to evolve. We also know that physical death, this other kind of death which is this time inescapable, will come eventually; we see its presence near and far. Death makes sense; it is familiar whether on a symbolic or more literal level: it comes to mean symbolically and historically. It is a kind of indexical symbol to use a Lacanian term, though a symbol that always loses its position as

symbol due to its indexicality, and an index that always becomes framework due to its symbolic position in the human mind. As traumatic moments are shifters between the autonomous and the plural, death becomes the alter ego of that shifter, another shifter that marks the difference as well as the connection between the symbolic and the historical, the symbolic and the social. The starting point in our conversation about trauma has to be death. Death is what we have in common with the other, and this common feature could very well be the promise of an individual and a national political recovery of sanity. Death is a common, specific and global site of trauma and can become a site of understanding, the common human thread in the struggle against violence. One might say that life is also what we have in common with the other, but again, an overview of the world political situation makes one doubt as to the sole validity—in the fight against national and international violence and separation through difference—of positive, global humanist discourses about our common universal human attributes.

Both WWII and 9/11 are specific traumas with very peculiar repercussions on certain communities in the U.S. and across the world, and thus should be recognized for their specificity. However, a historical trauma as it is described by one specific nation or cultural group should not come to the forefront of history and stay there to propagate one singular narrative about violence and erase the possibilities to think differently about trauma, about death, and about the interconnectedness of traumas worldwide or the interdependency of traumatic stories. 9/11 should leave the position it has adopted in the American imaginary, a position that affords trauma an even more dangerous status, a symbolic position (in Lacanian terms) that is timeless, outside history. 9/11, an event defined by the media and the American government as a traumatic origin, became the reference through which uncontested surveillance, regulation, and manipulation by the state as well as changes in the social law took place. As Judith Butler

argues, “Those who remain faceless or whose faces are presented to us as so many symbols of evil, authorize us to become senseless before those lives we have eradicated, and whose grievability is definitely postponed” (*Precarious Life* xviii). The responsibility of trauma studies today might be to deconstruct trauma as an autonomous, originary event and counter the transformation of specific autonomous traumas into symbolic events. Its responsibility is also to help redefine death as a possible transformative link between human communities who all live through death, though this living through takes place differently for everyone. Death could become the point of re-alliance between individuals within a nation and between “enemy” people. It could become a common knot, and a common symbolic and material site of knowledge from which to rethink our assumptions about “the enemy” and reconstruct what is being erased by nationalistic discourses--that is the enemy’s closeness to us in death.

In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth writes, “one’s own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another . . . trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another’s wound” (9). In an essay entitled “Freud, Lacan, and the Ethics of Memory,” Caruth reflects upon one of Freud’s case studies first introduced in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the case of a father dreaming about his burning child after the child has died of sickness. The body of his child lies in a room lit by a candle. The father who sleeps next door then dreams in response to the glare of a candle entering his room. This case is taken up by Lacan in “Tuché and Automaton,” and within the context of the dream, Lacan draws the link between dreaming, which for Freud signifies the impossibility for the father to confront the child’s death, and awakening. For Lacan, awakening from the dream is an awakening to the death of his child through a call from the dead. It is “a site of trauma, the trauma of the necessity and impossibility to respond to another’s death (*Unclaimed Experience* 100). Caruth states, “if

Freud reads in the dream of the burning child the story of a sleeping consciousness figured by a father unable to face the accidental death of his child, Lacan, for his part, reads in the awakening the story of the way father and child are inextricably bound together through the story of a trauma” (*Unclaimed* 102). This awakening from the dream comes to replace the missed awakening which should have taken place after the sudden death of the child. For Lacan, this awakening is also the site of an impossibility that is the “impossible responsibility of consciousness in its own originating relation to others and specifically to the deaths of others” (*Unclaimed* 104), an impossibility which eventually transforms itself into “the imperative of a speaking that awakens others” (*Unclaimed* 106), that “passes the awakening onto others” (*Unclaimed* 107) and promotes survival for the living by a movement away from the unproductive re-enactment of death and through an almost impossible acceptance of it. Caruth’s re-interpretation of the Lacanian reading of the dream stresses the importance of psychoanalysis in helping us live and think with and through death not just in order to accept our own mortality, but in order to link it with the mortality of others and think about the possibility that, within the contemporary political context, our friends and “enemies” are dying of violent death, unacceptable death, unimaginable death. We can think with and through death and stand up against the political apparatuses that promote the violent death of human bodies, not keep quiet and not accept death without a fight with words, not repeat that violence but use it as a linking thread to communicate with the other, the enemy who is dying too; all this in order to survive and make survive with and through death.

In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler argues that in our considerations of sex as construction, we need to take into account certain “constraints” which are insinuated into the norm. They reside inside the law, they are intrinsic to it-- and they are also a consequence of citationality, the

reiteration of the norm, a “ritualized production” (*Bodies* 95) according to Butler. Butler uses Lacan to define (she then critiques that definition) those constraints and their fixity. These constraints are symbolic and force subjects into assuming a certain normative position, and they are established as symbolic fixed positions with which a subject should identify (and this identification is described as a fantasy, a “wish” to get as close as possible to this fixed, almost timeless symbolic position). These symbolic constraints “mark the body . . . through threatening that body through the deployment/production of an imaginary threat” (*Bodies* 101). These symbolic constraints force the relinquishment to inscription, “the imaginary alignment with the . . . position marked out by the symbolic” (*Bodies* 101). The symbolic thus governs the imaginary which in return has little to no impact on the symbolic order. According to Lacan, the imaginary is always formed through the symbolic, and the symbolic sets the limit to the possible reconfigurations of the social relations which inscribe themselves in the Lacanian imaginary. This separation and untouchability of the symbolic in Lacanian psychoanalysis is irresponsible in a social and historical context. If an event, a particular figure, a particular belief manages to become mythologized to the point of reaching a symbolic position, a timeless and unchangeable dimension outside history, what are the consequences of the omnipresence of that “symbolic authority” (*Undoing Gender* 47) for humankind in a historical context?

This dichotomy and the ruling of one realm over another are problematic and should be deconstructed in order to redefine the relationship between symbols and history. According to Butler, the symbolic order “is the sedimentation of social practices” (*Undoing Gender* 44) and it should be contested as such along with the practices performed in its name (whether the preservation of the heterosexist matrix in the contemporary Western world; the preservation of

one nation's way of life against another's; the preservation of "democracy" whatever the cost; the disavowal of the other, the different, the "enemy," etc.).

Trauma is not "one." It is not a dot on the line of a human story or human history; it is a multidimensional web with its recognizable junction points, extended lines of sustenance, moments of departure, doubling, tripling of the lines in diverging directions, or possibly *points de capiton* as defined in Lacanian theory, illusory static moments that come to mean, to signify particular traumatic moments in a synchronic manner, and give meaning to other moments, past moments, in a diachronic manner, thus retroactively, *après-coup*. It is the making of meaning out of these points that are both singular and related to each other that will put Silko's traumatized character in *Ceremony*, Tayo, on the way towards recovery.

Silko, like Butler, emphasizes the close relationship between life and death and the role of death as a site of knowledge (never a site of denial) from which to critique illusions of totality, immortality, and autonomy certain cultures or nations see as implicit to their existence. Silko, like Butler, denounce the ways in which the use of nationalist discourses (full of treacherous symbols) and strategies have participated in the imperial project of promoting the deployment of Eurocentric values made universal and reproduced so as to erase the traumatized/colonized and the specificity of her trauma, her cultural paradigm. They both participate in what Ranjana Khanna in her book *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* calls "worlding" (a concept borrowed from Heidegger and redefined). According to Khanna, "the project of worlding is one of strife between the unconcealed (worlded) and the concealed (earthed)" (Khanna 4). The work of Silko and Butler is the work of unconcealment. They unveil the ways in which problematic responses to trauma and problematic conclusions on the characteristics and effects of trauma participate in the colonial project of erasing difference and foreclosing possible

productive connections between “enemy” cultures (the ex-empire and its ex-colonies, but also the new empires and their colonial targets) in the post-colonial era. In order to transform trauma studies into a productive post-colonial field of study, writers in/about the field have to put it through the work/process of unconcealment. The field of trauma studies has to open itself up to the consideration and analysis of forgotten traumas, and it has to recognize its own delinquencies, its own colonial tradition. Moreover, it should stop pretending to draw universal conclusions as to the “nature” and effects of trauma, and begin dealing with local traumatic events and their specific characteristics and repercussions.

Western criticism, which includes the field of trauma studies, should be put at the service of understanding difference—the different historical and political trajectories of cultures, their specific traumas, their particular evolutions according to locale. Trauma theorists should let themselves be transformed and transformed again by the testimonies of those who have lived through trauma. They should recognize the importance of analyzing localized traumas, the shapes they have taken, and the possibilities for new forms of resolution which depend on the traumatized individual or community’s specific needs. Trauma studies should be revised, revisited, by the very witnesses of trauma. Only through a dialogical relationship between (Western) trauma studies and non-Western cultural histories can trauma studies shed its colonial skin and become a universally meaningful post-colonial field—universally meaningful because concerned with an analysis of localized traumas and their specificity. The unearthing of the concealed counter-traumatic and counter-colonial potentiality of trauma studies takes place in the work of the writers of difference such as Silko and Butler. I am hopeful that their re-politicization of trauma studies will foster the post-colonial project of transcultural sharing and understanding despite cultural difference.

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