Affect, memory and the transmission of trauma

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Introduction

As it so happens with many promising projects, this special issue began long before we expected it to. Some serendipitous meetings in the early years of our graduate research sparked the mutual intrigue in our respective projects. Over time, while exchanging advice and readings, we discovered how strikingly some themes continued to resonate through our PhD research. Even while Nathan wrote about the Chinese diaspora and Elena wrote about Italian psychiatry, we fleshed out these seemingly disparate topics and found common grounds – in the themes of trauma, textures of suffering and problematic events that remain to haunt over the years. Surprised at the versatility of some of these theoretical concepts, we wondered to what other spaces, places and chronologies these ideas could extend to. Then, on one sunny evening on the patio at The New Cross House in Southeast London, we found special, spirited inspiration. The idea of organising a conference emerged, to facilitate a dialogue among scholars from different disciplines willing to address issues concerned with trauma, memory and hauntings. With the encouragement of our common supervisor, Professor Lisa Blackman, and the financial support from the Graduate School at Goldsmiths, University of London, we organised an interdisciplinary and international conference in March 2013, called ‘Affect, memory and the transmission of trauma’. The presentations delivered were captivating, thought provoking and challenged different ways of seeing trauma in affect and memory studies. The success of the conference led to this special issue. Although some presentations from the conference could not be included in this issue, we are indebted to all the speakers who participated.

The papers written for this special issue draw on the topics of affect, memory and traumatic transmission. The originality, creativity and vibrancy of these papers indeed exemplify the versatility and interdisciplinary relevance of the themes that drove the conference and this special issue. The aims of this

collection are therefore numerous. First, tying these papers together facilitates an important and innovative dialogue across the fields of affect, trauma and memory studies. Second, connecting these fields through perspectives on haunting, circulation and intergenerational transmission of trauma, this special issue aims to explore some perspectives that have remained slightly marginalised in the field of affect studies, as we further discuss below. Third, this collection aims to contribute to the field by providing empirical research and original case studies to develop work on affect and affectivity.

We here establish a conversation between social history accounts and individual memory practices, where memory and history are seen in an osmotic and mutually informative relationship. While we are not producing historical accounts *per se*, all five papers explore forms of memory as it reinforces, challenges or enacts mainstream social history accounts. Our interest in traumatic experiences is not a search for secrets to be revealed, or for 'forgotten event[s] that can be turned [...] into something monumental' (Hacking, 1995, p. 214). As Hacking (1995) suggests, the study of memory and trauma can become means for a 'scientificization' of the soul (p. 5), or what he terms 'a politics of the secret' (p. 214). Our engagement with secrecy in this collection, however, does not construe history as a crypt that contains a secret, but as a series of stories that call for telling. Thus, in employing the category of trauma as an analytical tool, we do not seek to 'uncover the origin or foundation' of a critical situation (Blackman, 1994, p. 486), but to trace the conditions of existence and circulation of its aftermaths. Situations in which facts are contested, where the past is understood in clashing ways and where public memory is divided, require the analysis of 'microhistories' and testimonies, which are critical to exploring the legacy of officially sanctioned historical accounts (see Foot, 2009). Several perspectives within the fields of affect, trauma and haunting studies indeed facilitate the analysis of these 'stories of history' (Davoine and Gaudillière, 2004, p. xxi), as well as the impact of official narratives on such stories and the people who narrate them. The following papers all address these 'stories of history' in their specific contexts, from the mediation of mass disappearances during the Argentinian 'Dirty War' (Sosa), to the process of 'collecting stories' by asylum seekers in Italy (Signorini); from problematic cinematic representations of Chinese history and diaspora (To), to forced migration of Indisch people from the Dutch East Indies (Dragojlovic), and to 'undigested' stories in the history of Italian psychiatry (Trivelli).

In collecting these 'stories', we ask a series of questions that constitute the running thread across this special issue and contribute to developing a category that we loosely define as 'transmission'. A series of questions is thus central to this work: How might affect, memory and the transmission of trauma intersect through diverse histories, eras and geographies? How might one engage a set of phenomena and stories 'totally cut off, ignored, but also well known to everyone' (Davoine and Gaudillière, 2004, pp. 28–29)? What might a return to the psychic contribute to discussions and debates within the field of affect studies?

Affect, Memory and the Transmission of Trauma

The topic of intergenerational transmission of trauma is already an established subfield of trauma and memory studies comprised of diverse perspectives. For instance, Assmann (2010, pp. 40–41) begins from conceptualisations of ‘individual memory’ and extends ‘outwards’, articulating the importance of family and larger society as key means of transmitting remembrances or forgettings. In a topological sketch of interconnectedness, Assmann articulates different forms of memory, which include ‘communicative remembrance’ (individual memory to social memory), and ‘cultural remembrance’ (political and cultural memory) (Assmann, 2010, pp. 40–44; see also Hirsch, 2012, p. 32). Hirsch’s acclaimed work with post-memory also intersects memory with second-generation trauma (specifically in second-generation trauma of survivors from historical atrocity), whereby the children of Holocaust survivors can remember such events ‘only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up’ (Hirsch, 2008, p. 106). As she suggests, ‘memory signals an affective link to the past’ (Hirsch, 2012, p. 33) and indeed post-memory ‘approximates memory in its *affective force*’ (Hirsch, 2008, p. 109, emphasis ours). Similarly, but with an emphasis on Ferenczi’s form of psychoanalysis, Abraham and Torok (1994) understand the transmission of trauma (transgenerational haunting) across familial generations through an unconscious ‘crypt’ space where unfinished or forgotten traumas of parents and ancestors pass on to the descendants (see also Derrida, 1986; Ferenczi, 2002). Cho (2008, p. 185) extends this concept of haunting by suggesting that trauma can distribute through the unconscious of a whole cultural diaspora (diasporic unconscious) trans-subjectively. These examples highlight but only a few of the varied perspectives on traumatic transmission, but already point to the importance of memory, multiplicity, collectivity, (trans) subjectivity, the psyche, family/ancestry, diasporas and affect.

This special issue contributes an innovative and urgent dialogue about the transmission of trauma across affect, memory and trauma studies. Collectively, the papers discuss transmission diversely, across chronological time, geographies, spaces, bodies, objects, atmospheres, diasporas, families and non-blood-related subjects. Each paper sets out to discuss trauma for both the people directly involved with the events in question, but also with those who experience such events indirectly. This establishes connections that Sosa cogently describes as ‘beyond’ and ‘after blood’ which, as she discusses, come to affect wider audiences, particularly through the use of media. In this respect, Signorini’s paper discusses the role of social workers and legal operators who assist asylum seekers in Italy, by listening, collecting, translating, ordering and organising the refugee’s narratives, which will then be presented to a committee that will decide whether to grant asylum. Here, Signorini reflects on how the question of credibility – crucial for the asylum seeker – is also internalised by the social worker, thus shaping her practice. In turn, Trivelli discusses how the failure to

recognise the affective impact of historical events might generate and sustain a psychic economy of trauma within communities and across generations. She explores how the Italian city of Gorizia has failed to officially acknowledge the affective heritage that a 1960s radical experiment in psychiatry left on the city. This leads to the past not being fully assimilated or 'digested', which can be literally felt even by those who were never involved. 'Transmission' is therefore here formulated as the consistent non-assimilation of the past.

This special issue configures trauma not as a property of events, but as an experiential category (Alexander, 2004), thus opening up the possibility of conceiving trauma as a form of social suffering (Walkerdine and Jimenez, 2012) and 'socialised melancholia' (Eng, 2010, p. 188). It is often the case that the origins of such social suffering – perhaps even the traumatic event itself – are simultaneously well known and yet shrouded, 'hidden in plain sight', or a 'black hole in collective memory' (Cho, 2008, pp. 125, 12.). Such histories can create '[ruptures] in the flows of time and space' that either produce annihilation anxiety, a chronic insecurity or creative capacity to survive (Walkerdine and Jimenez, 2012, pp. 78–79). For analysts Davoine and Gaudillière (2004), trauma is understood precisely as a rupture in the 'social link' between microhistories and macrohistories. Within these 'social links', the tension between history and memory blur and become difficult to identify through traditional means of sensory perception. To's critique of officially regulated Chinese cinema discusses this blurred line, where historical memories rendered visible on screen selectively commemorate and portray particular national wounds while silencing others for distribution to transnational, diasporic audiences. Gordon's (1997) work frames such settings as 'ghostly', where a history of erasure produces haunting effects on the present. This presence and circulation of trauma can be experienced in incomprehensible and uncanny ways, like a ghost that has 'an agency that cannot be conformed to a single shape, an agency that is everywhere but cannot be found' (Cho, 2008, p. 193). It is the perception of this 'agency', of 'what is not seen, but is nonetheless powerfully real; [...] what appears to be in the past, but is nonetheless powerfully present' (Gordon, 1997, p. 42) that we define as the experience of haunting. We therefore frame the presence of trauma as the circulation of what cannot be assimilated (Cho, 2008, p. 11), generating 'endings that are not over' (Gordon, 1997, p. 139).

The role of the psychic

How do we formulate 'transmission' in relation to memory and trauma within the expanding field of affect studies? The epistemological stance we take in describing particular *modes* of transmission is indeed central to the theoretical positioning in affect studies in which we are deeply interested. These modes of traumatic transmission reveal some overarching tensions across the papers between the material and the immaterial, and the physical and the psychic.

These tensions rest at the core of a particular direction we have decided to explore in the debates within affect studies. The papers in this collection uniquely contend that explorations of hauntings, as well as ‘stories of history’, should not be limited to the singular psychological subject and to the material body but, rather, re-configured through intersections of histories, trans-subjectivity and im/material bodies (see Blackman, 2012).

For instance, Sosa asserts that ‘clothes can be productive surfaces for the circulation of affects. [...] mediums with which to touch the past and glimpse the future’ (p. 364). Here, Sosa points to the contested site of the material and mundane within the (re)discovery of a ‘blue jumper’. This piece of clothing affectively circulates the remembrance of military violence and massacre in Argentina that links lost generations of the past with those of the present. Dragojlovic also advocates for a conceptualisation of the subject not as self-contained, where no categorical division should be drawn between the individual and her environment. Building from Brennan’s (2004) discussion of affective energies and impressions, Dragojlovic’s paper locates affective geographies through the transsubjective relationality of atmosphere and human and non-human bodies. This trans-relational link points to intergenerational memories of war and colonial violence that haunt the Indisch diaspora. This memory of violence haunting across generations echoes Cho’s (2008) understanding of how affect transfers through the unconscious of the Korean diaspora. Assemblages are created across time and space, and join with media technologies to create new models of seeing trauma – a diasporic vision – that are otherwise invisible because of the disavowals, gaps and silences of history (Cho, 2008; see also Guattari, 1995, pp. 10–11; Blackman, 2012, p. 136). In light of these mediated links ‘allowing one to bring a trauma that has been foreclosed into the social’ (Blackman, 2012, p. 136), To’s paper also points to the affective potency of diasporic vision through the cinematic assemblage across generations and geographies in the Chinese diaspora and ‘diasporic unconscious’ (see Cho, 2008). His caution, however, emphasises the need for critical reflexivity of what disavowed histories are brought to the screen, particularly when memory can be produced, modified and distributed by hegemonic forces and motivations revolving around issues of power.

Our position in this special issue contributes a needed dialogue within the current library of affect literature. There is no single, unitary ‘theory of affect’, as (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010, p. 5) point out, but many ‘swerves and knottings’. According to their analysis in the seminal *Affect Theory Reader*, two main vectors have traditionally predominated in the humanities and social sciences. The first consists of Tomkins’ psychobiology of differential affects (Tomkins, 1962; Tomkins, 1963; Kosofsky Sedwick, 2003). This view holds that affects are understood as biological programs that manifest physiologically. It has inspired the work of psychologist Ekman, on the relationship between affects and facial expressions (Ekman and Friesen, 2003), and also holds certain influence on some strands of neurobiology (Damasio, 2000).

The second vector is more phenomenological and stems from Deleuze's approach to affect as a bodily potential and capacity (Massumi, 2002; Deleuze, 2005; Deleuze and Guattari, 2007; Seigworth and Gregg, 2010). Also drawing on Merleau-Ponty's work and tradition of phenomenology, this perspective tends to emphasise the primacy of bodily experience over consciousness as a source of knowledge, a primordial openness of the body to the world, and an understanding of subjectivity as necessarily embodied (Merleau-Ponty, 2002).

Both traditions have mainly engaged with affect essentially in physical, organic and biological terms, as 'free' (Kosofsky Sedwick, 2003) and 'autonomous' (Massumi, 2002), whereby affects appear as non-cognitive, non-intentionalist (Leys, 2007; Leys and Goldman, 2010), 'outside social signification' (Hemmings, 2005, p. 549), and *a*-subjective (Leys, 2000, p. 450; Gibbs, 2010, p. 187). Indeed, they are defined as 'visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing' (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010, p. 1, emphasis in the original). Affect can also be understood as a bodily potential and capacity (Massumi, 2002; Deleuze, 2005; Deleuze and Guattari, 2007; Seigworth and Gregg, 2010).¹ On the one hand, the turn to the phenomenological and the biological is framed as a reaction against the supposed anti-biologism and anti-materialism of post-structuralist perspectives, and the constructionist and interpretivist privileging of discourse over embodied experience (Leys, 2011, p. 440; Meloni, 2011, pp. 299–301). On the other hand, this shift towards organicism and anti-intentionalism favours a biological approach to the understanding of human behaviour and subjectivity, to the detriment of the psychic and unconscious realms (Blackman, 2010; Leys and Goldman, 2010).

At this juncture, the aversion of affect studies to the psychological and the unconscious requires more transparency. Drawing from a Deleuzian heritage, Massumi's (2002) influence in affect studies and his rejection of problematic Freudian concepts – such as repression – point to crucial reasons why many affect theorists eschew psychoanalysis (see Massumi, 2002, p. 16; Leys, 2011, pp. 458–459; Woodward, 2015, p. 81). For instance, the rhetorical preference for the term, 'non-conscious', conceptually liberates affect theorists away from the problems associated with (Freudian) psychoanalysis and the 'unconscious' (Massumi, 2002, p. 16; Leys, 2011; Wetherell, 2012). In this framework, Massumi's understanding of 'transmission' involves the Spinozian definition of the body's 'ability to affect and openness to be affected', as well as autonomic, non-conscious and non-signifying 'intensities' that circulate/transfer between organic and/or inorganic bodies (Massumi, 1995; 2002, p. 61). Consequently, there is a mark of absence in regard to the psychic and the complexities of the unconscious within the field of affect studies. There are exceptions to this trend, and some theorists associated with the 'turn-to-affect' from the phenomenological tradition have indeed conversed with issues of the psyche. These include the works of Blackman (2010, 2012) and Walkerdine (2010; Walkerdine and Jimenez, 2012). For example, Blackman's (2010) work on affect has argued for

the importance of addressing the ‘problem of the psyche’ in new ways rather than ignoring or minimising it. Such perspectives are further innovated by Blackman’s (2012) work with incorporeal modes of telepathic transfer with or without subjects through phenomena such as suggestion and voice-hearing. Walkerdine’s (2010; see also Walkerdine and Jiminez, 2012) work in the fields of psychosocial studies and critical psychology has engaged with a vocabulary on affect to explore the re-negotiation of identity and repercussions of traumatic events across generations, by examining the psychological role of ‘objects of fantasy’ for communities and the dynamics of communal forms of ‘holding together’. Walkerdine has also supported a methodological engagement with psychoanalysis in social research, whereby ‘the researcher herself is the primary instrument of enquiry’ (Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001, p. 86).

The scarcity of work in the field of affect studies that engaged with psychic phenomena such as fantasy, nostalgia and unconscious connections to one’s past had indeed been an important drive for the conference ‘Affect, memory and the transmission of trauma’ in 2013. The following papers engage to different degrees with the physicality of the body and suggest that, in the transmission of trauma, bodies and psyches intertwine, sharing and enacting many ‘stories of history’. In particular, Trivelli discusses how the non-assimilation of events manifests in and through psychosomatic feelings of nausea. Dragojlovic also draws a connection between body, psyche and space, suggesting that the aligning of these elements can generate deep connectivity with one’s past. In her paper, Signorini explores the process by which asylum seekers must not simply recall and narrate past events and atrocities, but also constantly worry of whether their life story is believable, and continuously prove that if their past is not believed, their future will certainly be frightful. At the intersection between the past and the future, Signorini also places the body – disquietingly evident when a man asks his social worker ‘how much should I be tortured in order to get a permit to stay?’ (p. 395) – but remains critical towards a focus on bodies only, for example when medical certificates are produced to prove a refugee’s condition.

This special issue thus innovates a *re*-turn to the psychic through frameworks intersecting transmission, memory and trauma. Even so, none of the papers in this collection speak of trauma in a traditionally clinical sense. That is, none suggest the literal repetition of trauma that characterises the symptomatology of the clinical diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This framework indeed depends on the limits of the rational, material and conscious, while dismissing the primacy of the inexplicable, im/material and un/conscious (see Blackman, 2012). These contributions suggest instead that trauma lingers as the non-assimilated and often becomes naturalised, constantly present, at times invisible, affecting our everyday life (see Cvetkovich, 2003; Cvetkovich, 2012). In fact, when the weight of a crisis is displaced, trauma ‘materialises in forms far removed from the traumatic event itself, often through sensations, emotions, and unconscious thought’ (Cho, 2008, p. 24). One of our central aims here is to

discuss history and memory *vis-à-vis* the intergenerational and intercorporeal transmission of trauma, in ways that trigger a thoughtful dialogue that re-turns to the psyche in the field of affect studies.

As echoed by Erikson (1995), the power of traumatic memory, or the memory of trauma, involves how ‘our memory repeats to us what we haven’t yet come to terms with, what still haunts us’ (p. 184). Indeed, as the papers in this collection demonstrate, ‘whatever the measures chosen for erasing facts and people from memory, the erasures, even when perfectly programmed, only set in motion a memory that does not forget and that is seeking to be inscribed’ (Davoine and Gaudillière, 2004, p. xxvii). The traces of ‘a memory that does not forget’ are often undocumented, sometimes invisible, intangible yet undeniable, found in liminal spaces, between the nebulous and the concrete, fantasies and ‘facts’, and ‘between psychic and social history’ (Cho, 2008, p. 151). In configuring trauma as an affective economy and a psychic apparatus of transmission, this special issue reiterates the significance of the unconscious. The ways in which the past has been partly erased or removed come to constitute, in the present, what Cho (2008) defines as a ‘fabric of erasure’ (p. 17). As all the contributions that follow propose, the non-assimilated is not merely a disturbance, but also a productive platform with the power to connect subjects across time, space, consciousness, bodies and subjectivities. If this special issue can weave together a collage that remembers what has been silenced and disavowed, then our hope is that we will produce new threads of reflection, insight and justice.

Note

- 1 Félix Guattari has also drawn upon Daniel Stern’s ‘vitality affects’ to develop his perspective on the three ecologies – the interrelation between ecologies of environmental, mental and social spheres (Guattari, 2008). His work on ‘schizoanalytic cartographies’ sketches the possible domains, configurations and expansions of subjectivity, and is proving particularly relevant in debates over the uses of psychoanalytic approaches in psychosocial studies (see Walkerdine, 2014).

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