

Languages of Trauma: History, Memory, and Media ed. by Peter Leese (review) Todd Meyers *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 96 (3), Fall 2022, pp. 471-472 (Article) Published by Johns Hopkins University Press DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/bhm.2022.0043>

Peter Leese, Julia Barbara Köhne, and Jason Crouthamel, eds. *Languages of Trauma: History, Memory, and Media*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021. 408 pp. Ill. \$75.00 (978-1-4875-0896-8 9).

Languages of Trauma is a probing collection of essays that explores where and how language and other forms of expression are made available for communicating and representing the experience of trauma. The fifteen essays that make up the volume are categorically interdisciplinary and unequivocally rigorous in their respective fields. The essays move across psychology, psychoanalysis, medicine, literary studies, anthropology, sociology, history, performance, drama, and film. By giving these perspectives and approaches equal footing, the editors resist the tendency to offer a single disciplinary framework that might otherwise seek to explain or minimize the complex realities of trauma and its aftermath. The essays together refuse the proposition that trauma is somehow beyond representation, echoing in part the thesis of Georges Didi-Huberman's *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, a study in response to the critique that the Shoah is beyond comprehension and thus beyond representation, showing the photograph's ability to speak the unspeakable.¹ But here the question is not whether representation or speech is possible; the question is, what forms do we expect these things to take? The essays in the volume move outward from existing languages of trauma in order to test how trauma finds words and images. Throughout the authors engage disciplinary repertoires for presenting and re-presenting trauma's experiential knowledge and the language of memory in order to question if these modes of showing and thinking are sufficient, but also critically, to ask, sufficient for what? As the editors write in their "Introduction," the effort is not to explain or remediate trauma, but to show "how traumatic memory strives to be articulated" (p. 4). Representational forms are key, and in the essays these forms travel between imagination and the hardened realities of violence and injury, through images, cultural languages, modes of telling and listening, and visual cultures.

The essays represent a broad range of disciplinary perspectives, cases, and voices, and are equally impressive in their quality. Still, a few essays stand out. Bridget E. Keown examines the diaries and personal writings of nurses during the First World War, which tell a story not often heard, one that is not male-centered, and one that absorbs the deep trauma of war in all its graphicness and plotlessness, recorded in an atmosphere of threat, worry, and care. Jason Crouthamel finds a different focus in the diary letters of German soldiers and offers a delicate analysis of what the author calls the "languages of religion and nerves," two overlaid ways that soldiers came to understand their bodily circumstances, situated somewhere between fate and fragility. Jennifer Anderson Bliss shows how Art Spiegelman's graphic novel on the World Trade

Center braids the trauma of the terror attacks 1. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, trans. Shane B. Lillis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).⁴⁷² book reviews *Bull. Hist. Med.*, 2022, 96 and the Shoah, which produces a complicated form of historical memory that is piercingly exact and at the same time, untethered from a single event. In the essays, words and memories are not neatly held in place; they move out of their historical particulars and swerve wildly into others.

The lived aftermath of the 1965/66 Indonesian Massacre is the subject of two essays. Dyah Pitaloka and Hans Pols look at how the recognition of victimhood during and after the mass killing of accused communists is performed by the Dialita choir and Teater Tamara. These performances, which are full-throated acknowledgments of suffering and hope, puncture the instrumental silence used by the “masterminds” of the genocide. These acts of recognition seem to contradict the conceit of Joshua Oppenheimer’s film, *The Act of Killing*, discussed in an essay by Julia Barbara Köhne, which repeats the apocryphal claims that the memory of the genocide has fallen into oblivion.² As Köhne’s essay explains, Oppenheimer’s film shows how slippery the inversion of victim and perpetrator can be, especially when the perpetrators themselves retell events. But in the reenactments of killings by the killers that Oppenheimer’s film documents, as compelling and confounding as they are, the ability of the killers to redirect the meaning of the violence they originally authored is too much for the film and filmmaker to control, and produces rather than resists the misplaced redemption of the killers the film aims to critique.

The later essays in the volume are written from the unique vantage point of those engaged in performance. Katrina Bugaj’s “Some Things Are Difficult to Say” traces the evolution of her performance work, which instrumentalizes her body and voice as an opening of wider forms of speech. The essay is a record of public performances reformulated on the page, masterfully laid out in text and images. Emily Mendelsohn gives a firsthand account directing plays in the United States, Uganda, and Rwanda, creative work which seeks to locate a language of trauma with no impulse to explain and dispense with known events, but rather to produce work that explores healing, moving within memory, and in a way, redraws lines of repair.

Languages of Trauma is a sharp addition to trauma literature and a welcome critique of the divisions within scholarship--divisions often bound by forms and norms of disciplinary work. This volume, taken as a whole, explores not only what various archives and sources can say, but also tests our capacity to listen.

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