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TITLE: The Unspeakable: Narratives of Trauma

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#### SUMMARY

The Unspeakable: Narratives of Trauma (henceforth, *Unspeakable*) is an edited collection of 14 papers drawn from and inspired by “Exploring the Edge of Trauma” (Kingston University, London, UK, May 2010) -- an international conference organized by Lieve Spaas and Fran Lloyd on trauma and the representation of trauma through art and other visual means. As a collection, the chapters address three themes related to the study of trauma and traumatic events: 1) the effect of traumatic experiences on the trauma survivor’s relationship to self and

others, 2) the processes by which voice and meaning are given to traumatic experiences, and 3) the manner in which individuals and societies do (Posttraumatic Growth) or do not (Posttraumatic Stress Disorder – PTSD) move on from these experiences. Individually, the texts differently interrogate trauma as it is understood (from more medically-oriented definitions as determined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders versus more psychologically-oriented ones associated with the APA), experienced (as a result of war, displacement, rape), documented (through letters, diaries, novels) and analyzed (as discourse, archival texts, newspaper coverage, visual art).

Following a brief introduction by the volume's editors, the papers that comprise *Unspeakable* are presented through four "contexts" of trauma: 1) Historical, 2) Socio-political, 3) "Singular Events", and 4) Theoretical. Additionally, each text is preceded by a quotation reflecting a major theme within the paper. For example, the quote by Abraham Lincoln, "With the fearful strain that is on me day and night, if I did not laugh, I should die", introduces Jakub Kazecki's "The Functions of Humor and Laughter in Narrating Trauma in German Literature of the First World War". A short summary of each work follows, presented under its respective context, and with the first and last names of the authors provided in parenthesis.

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT.** The five chapters in this section demonstrate the potential of historical documents (which the reader should read as both historical texts and texts about historic events) to provide modern-day readers with access to narrative accounts of past traumatizing events. In unearthing the use, misuse, and even absence of use of language within these texts, the papers reveal the impact of historic traumas and the role of tellings and retellings in redressing the psychological effects of these events on both the individual and the national collective.

The section opens with "France in Shock from its Revolution" (Xavier Martin). Drawing upon the writings, documented eye-witness accounts, and personal correspondences of notable figures of the time, Martin exposes these texts for their ability to shed light on the magnitude of societal upheaval within France during the French Revolution. Martin takes particular note of this disruption as it is reflected in documented comments on language use -- from the obscuring and shifting of conventional meaning through the use of euphemisms, to the unreliability and even purposeful misuse of traditional titles and labels. "The Functions of Humor and Laughter in Narrating Trauma in German Literature of the First World War" (Jakub Kazecki) tackles the seemingly incongruous expressions of humor and laughter in the face of war-related events within two German novels -- *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Remarque 1929) and *Storm of Steel* (Jünger 1920). Humor and laughter in these texts are examined as literary techniques through which narrative characters and their German readers are provided the textual space to process two traumatic aspects associated with World War I: the country's defeat in the war and the shift in Western military tactics from a hand-to-hand to a more mechanized combat style. "The Human Body in Nazi Concentration Camps: The Case of Stanislaw Grzesiuk" (Bożena Karwowska) presents an analysis of Grzesiuk's autobiography, *Pięć lat Kacetu* (Five Years in a Concentration Camp [1958]). Karwowska's text establishes a connection between Grzesiuk's social position as a working class Jew and his emphasis on the less intellectualized theme of the body under captivity. Karwowska notes Grzesiuk's multiple references to prisoners' attempts to protect, nourish, sustain and ultimately meet the basic needs of the body, and the

communicative role adopted by the body under captivity: as the mouth becomes silent under submission, the rest of the body takes up the task of mediating linguistic expression (the eyes relate fear, reflect dying, express cravings, and expose desire). The silencing of speech as a result of the traumatic events of war is likewise addressed in “Traumatic Silences in Contemporary Australian War Fiction” (Tessa Lunney). However, Lunney explores silence, not as the result of speech that is subjugated, but as a “socially constructed space in and about which subjects and words normally used in everyday life are not spoken” (Winter 2010: 4). Drawing on this understanding of silence, Lunney examines the literary portrayals of silence between soldiers and the civilian populations they encounter in three novels that depict Australia’s involvement in World War I (*The Wing of Night*, 2007), World War II (*The Great World*, 1990), and the Vietnam War (*After the Fire, A Still Small Voice*, 2009). The section concludes with “A Trauma in Hiding: The Case of Jules Marchal” (Lieve Spaas), a work that recounts the story of Belgian civil servant turned historian, Jules Marchal. Confronting the atrocities committed by his government and through his own administrative (in)actions in the Congo, Marchal published a series of historical books documenting the brutal colonial practices and symbolic images associated with Belgian colonization of the Congo. Spaas posits that in publishing these texts, Marchal documents and gives voice, not only to the traumatic events of this period, but also to the traumatic effects that guilt, silence and denial bring to the colonizer.

**SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT.** The chapters in this section introduce various material expressions of trauma and traumatic events set within specific socio-political contexts. The texts additionally address the ways in which individual (personal) traumas are collectively shared, remembered, and preserved through these material means. “The Trauma of Culture Shock” (Barbara Chettle) explores culture shock as a form of trauma which leaves the sufferer with a sense of loss of connectedness and isolation, partially due to the linguistic barriers created by language. Based on analyses of audio-recorded interviews of Laotian refugees in Canada, Chettle examines the linguistic, psychological, social and cultural constraints of expressing trauma authentically through the borrowed language and culture of another. “Exploring the Edge of Trauma: The Differing Dynamics of Tragedy and the Sublime” (Kebedech Tekleab) explores the role visual art can play in the memory of and in protest against the traumatic effects of war. The paper recounts Tekleab’s personal journey as a prisoner of war in Somalia and later artistic journey as a visual artist and poet committed to producing art that “express[es] tragic situations beautifully” (Tekleab 2014: 127). Tekleab describes the process by which her work has shifted to depict less the visible external effects of trauma and traumatic events and more the metaphorical representation of the internal effects of such experiences. “Creating a Habitable Everyday in Estonian Women’s Diaries of the Repressions of the Stalinist Regime” (Leena Kurvet-Käosaar) explores the trauma and interruption to daily life of deportation through the diaries of two Estonian women sent to the forced labor camps of Siberia (the Russian Gulag). The diaries present material evidence to the ordinariness of life in the midst of extraordinary events. Likewise, the act of keeping and preserving a journal serve as testimonials to the desire for normalcy and routine even in the face of traumatic experiences. The final text in this section, “Trauma in Words: Comparison of the Coverage in *Le Devoir* and the *Toronto Star* of the 2010 Haitian Earthquake (Irena Radišević), explores the framing of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti as a traumatic event in these two newspapers. Through an analysis of lexical usage and word frequencies related to the word

“trauma”, Radišević demonstrates how events can be differently represented as traumatic, impacting the manner in which an event is interpreted by readers outside of that event’s immediate context.

“SINGULAR EVENTS” CONTEXT. Whereas the contexts previously described depict traumatic events collectively shared, historically documented, and fairly openly (publicly) discussed, the current context presents traumatic experiences that occur at the individual (personal) level. Additionally, despite being shared widely by individuals across time and space, these experiences remain less openly addressed due to the stigma associated with them. Meaning-making and recovery thus becomes a process of finding the language authorized to express and process these “unspeakable” experiences. “Metaphors We Li(v)e by: Disease as a Conceptual Metaphor for Sexual Assault” (Magda Stroińska) explores one individual’s attempt to process and minimize the stigma of sexual assault by re-narrating the experience as one in which the individual is suffering from cancer. “Metamorphosing Difficulties: The Portrayal of Trauma in Autobiographical Comics” (Sarah Lightman) confronts the trauma of loss -- of a parent, child, sexual wholeness -- and the process of bereavement experienced by representing these traumatic experiences through graphic and textual narratives (graphic comic strips) and publically displaying the works. “Having a relative with Mental Illness: Beyond the Traditional Definition of Trauma” (Avi Sanders and Kate Szymanski) interrogates current legitimated definitions of trauma and traumatization, positing the need for a psychological designation of trauma that includes the care of individuals with mental illness. Expanding the current definition of trauma to include these individuals legitimizes the transformation of experience that the care of such individuals requires.

THEORETICAL CONTEXT. This final context treats theoretical approaches to understanding trauma. “Breaking the Silence: Reevaluating What Makes an Experience a Trauma” (Avigail Gordon and Kate Szymanski) argues for a definition of trauma -- or more specifically, of the qualifying event that engenders the trauma -- that is flexible enough to give voice to expressions of trauma that lie outside traditional clinical definitions of traumatic experience (such as those related to PTSD that manifest less as issues of physical safety and more with changes/loss to identity). “Trauma Narrative: Recovery and Posttraumatic Growth – A Clinical Perspective” (Kate Szymanski and Nancy Rosenfeld) asserts the importance of the narrative form in posttraumatic growth. In this work, the authors highlight the role of narrative in ordering, meaning-making, and recovery after a traumatic experience precisely because of the role narrative plays in addressing the silences that accompany traumatic experiences.

## EVALUATION

Unspeakable is a work of Psychology. Though the editors position the volume as an interdisciplinary approach to the study of trauma, the underlying theoretical orientation to understanding trauma and traumatic experience is drawn from the field of psychology, the disciplinary home of trauma studies. In fact, in the introduction to *Unspeakable*, the editors provide a definition of trauma as it is understood in Psychology – “an individual’s response to an event or a series of events that completely overwhelm that individual’s ability to cope with the experience and, subsequently, to integrate it into their life’s narrative” (Stroińska,

Szymanski and Cecchetto 2014: 13). Yet, even within this field, trauma is not an uncontested term (as Sanders and Szymanski point out in their two submissions to this volume). Nonetheless, in bringing together these varied disciplinary treatments of trauma, most of which share a common theoretical understanding of trauma, the chapters that comprise *Unspeakable* manage to successfully push against a strictly field-based understanding of trauma and traumatic experience to give voice to new perspectives and methods by which traumatization can be defined and explored.

Additionally, though the editors make a point of bringing together work that interrogates trauma differently, narrative -- as referenced in the book's title -- is left uninterrogated. The conception of narrative adopted by these works, again, is drawn from the field of psychology where the analytical interpretation of narrative is taken as the organization and expression of experience and memory through "stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on" (Bruner 1991: 4). Yet, what is authorized as narrative can vary greatly across disciplines -- from an understanding of narrative as the sharing of big (Linde 1993), small (Bamberg 2006) or conversational tales (Ochs and Capps 2001) in either oral or written forms, to recounting events that follow an underlying narrative structure that must include evaluation (Labov and Waletzky 1967). Rather, the works in this volume leave a space for narrative that goes beyond the linguistic and even the verbal to include issues of voice, silence, and the visual and material expression of experience. The emphasis on narrative in this area is more readily seen in research within the area of applied linguistics, and in particular in work with English as a Second/Foreign Language or immigrant, migrant, and refugee populations (e.g. Finn 2010; Phipps 2013). As such, the papers in *Unspeakable* may be of greatest interest to Applied Linguists.

Finally, any limitations worth noting about the book are identified by the editors themselves in the introduction. For example, the volume is notably absent coverage of trauma presented from a non-Western perspective. As such, the work is missing the diverse conceptions and experiences of trauma as revealed in non-Western societies. Thematically, it is also absent the traumatic experiences and events that have impacted marginalized groups, such as the experiences of Indigenous and First Nations communities, accounts of enslaved communities and individuals (including sex workers, such as the "comfort women" of WWII -- see Nozaki 2005), stories of living with stigmatizing diseases or illnesses, narratives of poverty, urban violence, displacement and migration, and even tales of financial ruin. In spite of these limitations, *Unspeakable* is a very worthwhile contribution to the study of trauma and traumatic events.

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