

Structural Trauma

Elena Ruíz
Michigan State University¹

The abject heart of colonialism and neocolonialism, and their practice of capitalism, is *gendered violence*...I think that such violence is not incidental but common to the stresses that race, gender, and sexuality play in ordering and reordering power in our times.

-- Dian Million, *Therapeutic Nations*

On the night of April 24, 2019 that coincided with day 5-Eagle (Cuauhtli, 1-Ozomahtli) in the Aztec solar year 7-Reed (Acatl), the Mayor of Mixtla Altamirano was traveling on the Zoologica-Orizaba highway in the state of Veracruz when a speeding vehicle pulled up, hovered, and sprayed her car with bullets. Maricela Vallejo Orea, along with her husband and driver, were killed instantly. Maricela was six months pregnant. Prior to her murder, as Mayor she had proposed the creation of an agency across every municipality to address the systemic nature of gender-based violence, particularly against her Indigenous community.

There is a very old narrative in western culture that frames trauma (from the Greek *troma*, meaning wound) as the unavoidable casualty of individual fate, something that is built into the very fabric of being in a gambled tradeoff for living self-determined lives. The origin story of this narrative can be traced back to ancient Greek myths of white-robed goddesses—the three Moirai—who moved the mortal spheres of life and death and laid out essential vulnerabilities in the character of every human life. They cast their dice and watched mortals react in self-defining acts. If their fates landed well, it said little of the fated's character: 'bad luck' can *make you who you are*, whereas responses to good fortunes reflect who you already are—we learn this from the actions of Oedipus Rex and from Aeschylus's trickster king of Corinth, Sisyphus. The *logic of wounding*, which narrates tragedy as an unforeseeable and unavoidable part of human life, was thus intimately tied to the *logic of individuation*, which detaches people from the sets of social, cultural, and epistemic practices that produce them in order to place their lives within a universalized narrative arc of human existence.² Together these logics of wounding and individuation are intimately connected to a normalized conception of *tragedy as inherently blameless*, a game of chance where a person's 'bad luck' was disassociated from organized, coordinated efforts structured to bring harm and injury to some people but not others.³

For Indigenous women and women of color living in settler colonial societies like the United States, Canada, and The United Mexican States (Estados Unidos Mexicanos), these founding myths have had a lasting and damaging impact for the role they play in maintaining conceptions of trauma that preclude the identification of ongoing structural oppressions and systemic femicidal violence in our communities.⁴ The philosophical failure to understand trauma as a functional, organizational tool of

settler colonial violence amplifies the impact of traumatic experience on specific populations, not by accident, but by design. This is not an epistemic ‘whoopsie,’ an unintended consequence of historical trajectories terraformed into tradition. Rather, it is *an organized hermeneutic standpoint* that recognizes the *injuries* of some populations and perpetuates the conditions for the nonrecognition of others for epistemic profit, accumulating in interpretive value/wealth from one white settler generation to the next.⁵ The rise of the legal concept of *Iniuria* in ancient Rome did not come about by accident; it developed to formalize the logic of wounding in terms of grievable harms reserved for specific populations and inapplicable to others, namely, slaves.⁶ If your injury has social cognates, especially ameliorative ones, you’re simply more likely to live—that is a powerful social good, one that has been non-accidentally accumulated by one cultural tradition.

Epistemically, not much has changed since the development of the concept of injury rooted in Roman Law. Because the logic of individuation ascribes a disembodied faculty of purely abstract rational thought to the individual, which it values above embodied, situated, contextual and land-based understanding and knowledge rooted in webs of reciprocal relationships, the logic of wounding tied to individuation remains reserved for those already recognized as subjects in settler colonial culture.⁷ The logic of wounding frames Indigenous land dispossession and genocide on Turtle Island as a historic tragedy located in the past that was caused more by the unforeseeable effects of the spread of European diseases in the ‘New World’ than by the deliberate, methodical, plotting of settlers and the governments that supported them to slaughter Native peoples and occupy and exploit Native lands in order to secure land and livelihood for future generations of white settler offspring.⁸ The logic of wounding has also been tied to what Patrick Wolfe (1999; 2006) calls a *logic of elimination* for Indigenous peoples, which settlers use to portray colonial invasion as a finite “historical event” reducible to “frontier homicide” and the moral pitfalls of a young nation instead of an organized structure with ongoing tactics of spatial containment and violence (2006, 388).

The logic of individuation also underlies and is entangled with colonial ideologies that help carry out the colonial project, such as neoliberal carceral ideologies. On my account, it is thus additionally tied to a *logic of containment* for people of color. Like the logic of elimination, the logic of containment is also multipronged; it upholds settler colonial structures of oppression and is in turn strengthened by them, creating an endless positive feedback loop. It justifies the hyper-surveillance of communities of color and leads to the removal of people of color from our communities and our absorption into the prison-industrial complex in order to extract our labor while promoting intergenerational harm and trauma to our communities through the destruction of our families. It is also a geopolitical strategy of coordinated restraint in response to extra-legal uses of force that enables the systematic production of torture, abuse, and sexual violence through structural impunity; it makes *uncountable* those violences that function to further the goals of settler-capital industrial economies and neoliberal agendas.⁹ Whether by sword or shield, the logic of containment produced by the logic of individuation within settler societies thus invariably also leads to elimination for people of color. The logic of elimination and the logic of containment are both rooted in the structural automation and expansive reproduction of fertile avenues of *force*, positive and negative, that promote the production and maintenance of settler colonial wealth while simultaneously exonerating white settler culpability

through cultural apparatuses like law, policy, law enforcement, governance, and the concepts that uphold them. I explain this non-accidental, strategic, and complex settler-colonial use of force (*forzis*) further in terms of institutionalized violence and the idea of *structural trauma*.

Before proceeding, and to thwart risks of getting too theoretically abstract—because Maricela’s life was not abstract—let me clearly state that what I am arguing for is *a politicized understanding of trauma* that foregrounds our lived realities of asymmetric harm when it comes to traumatic experience. Trauma and its impacts are not evenly distributed across all populations, despite the fact that medical and disciplinary literature often treat them as if they are. In the standard western picture, trauma is portrayed as human risk factor to which people are universally vulnerable. Social determinants such as poverty, war, social class, and environmental exposures are presented as predisposing some populations to greater incidence of traumatic harm. These factors, then, are treated as what create hot zones of traumatological effects. In contrast to this picture, I contend that the primary producers of trauma and its impacts are the *organizational logics of domination that perpetuate conditions of poverty, war, racism and sexual violence for some populations but not others*—strategically, predictively, and intergenerationally.

One way to understand how the standard medical approach disappears the colonial production of population-level harms is through the distinction in population health science between ‘causes of cases’ and ‘causes of incidence’. As Sean Valles (2018) explains:

The distinction is between two types of causal explanation for two different types of causal phenomena...for instance, genetic variations make individual people a substantially higher or lower risk of hypertension (Padamanabhan et al: 2015), but these individual-level variations seem to make no causal contributions to the extensively studied massive disparity in hypertension rates between US White and Black populations (Kaufman et al 2015). Genetics may explain much about sick individuals (causes of cases) but do little to explain why some populations are plagued by hypertension more than other populations (causes of incidence) (Valles 2016) (116).

Trauma models of care often follow the ‘causes of cases’ model. As such, they fail to address the systemic violence and functionalization of racist sexism and sexual violence in women’s lives that a ‘causes of incidence’ approach might help track. Such an approach could better capture, for instance, how settler colonial governments infrastructurally support femicide with impunity through law and policy, as well as how gender has always been a primary tool of settler colonial violence, particularly against Indigenous women and women of color (Deer 2015; Ritchie 2017). Importantly, politicized approaches to trauma do not take away provision models of care for those suffering from the effects of trauma today¹⁰; they only insist that traumatic effects are being *non-accidentally* glossed over and strategically misrecognized or pathologized when those who suffer the logic of wounding are not white.

Since the term first rose to prominence in sixteenth-century European anatomical treatises and later experienced a resurgence in the developing fields of psychology and neurology, trauma has been

characterized in a range of domains. These include emotion-based accounts which characterize trauma as “an experience of unbearable affect” (Krystal 1978; Stolorow 2007), socio-ecological models of multiple traumas and clinical disorders such as PTSD, and surgical approaches to wound triage in emergency medicine. Today, while trauma can be used to refer equally well to physical or mental injury, accounts of trauma’s cause, duration, and function diverge. In the humanities, two models have prevailed following the assumptive trends in Cartesian and Post-Cartesian traditions: psychoanalysis and narrative theory, the latter of which approaches trauma from the notion of relationality, and both of which include corresponding feminist approaches.¹¹

One of the main lines of thought about trauma, whether understood as a physical or mental injury or both, has been its special connection to the idea of tragedy and the emotional life of individuals undergoing pain. In “Tragedy: A Curious Art Form” (2006), the classicist Anne Carson writes: “Why does tragedy exist? Because you are full of rage. Why are you full of rage? Because you are full of grief” (7). This grief comes from an injury, a wound (*troma*), that bereavement tries to suture closed. What is lost in this *tragedy-rage-grief* causal triad is the direct link from rage to the causes of incidence that perpetuate grief-inducing violence in some communities but not others, strategically, predictively, and from one generation to the next.¹² This triad is no accident. The ancient Greeks were experts at depoliticizing grief and creating a new form of public art to regulate the shifting emotional boundaries between public and private life in the tenuous rise of democratic rule. This was the work of tragic plays.¹³ The very meaning of tragedy comes from these plays—*tragoidia*, from *tragos*, meaning goat, as in the human-goat satyrs that performed between acts, and *oide*, or public performance of song. Tragedy arose in the west as a public mechanism to contain social forces and resistance to violence through a) internalizing conflicts and b) depoliticizing violence by portraying it as a naturally occurring phenomenon. The latter is represented in the tragic hero’s inability to foresee the consequences of their actions. More recently, Stephen Diamond’s (1996) celebrated work on the psychological genesis of violence reinforces the depoliticized view of trauma by characterizing increased homicide rates in the U.S. as “senseless violence,” something he says we can make sense out of only if we see violence “existentially” as the “naturally occurring, universal, *inescapable* aspects of the human condition” (9, emphasis added). We can also get a glimpse of the internalizing function of tragedy in Carson’s universalist account of the psychology behind it:

Grief and rage—you need to contain that, to put a frame around it, where it can play itself out without you or your kin having to die. There is a theory that watching unbearable sorties about other people lost in grief and rage is good for you—may cleanse you of your darkness. Do you want to go to the pits of yourself all alone? Not much. What if an actor could do it for you? Isn’t that why they are called actors? They act for you. You sacrifice them to action. (Ibid)

Except tragedy has always been a theater of sacrifice that kills the Black actors first, enacts horrific sexual violence on women for endless replay, and systemically degrades the human worth of immigrants of color for the benefit of white audiences and the settler gaze.¹⁴ Who is sacrificing whom in order to visualize pain? The *trauma-pain-tragedy* triad is one of the most strategically depoliticized configurations in settler epistemic systems. It was central to the rise of the model of

native informancy in colonial testimonies of trauma and remains a powerful force today. It manifests most vividly in the silencing of calls for change made in the wake of communally traumatizing targeted violence against racialized peoples, as in the recent mass shooting of Mexicans in El Paso, Texas. Let's bury the dead first. Don't politicize tragedy—no one could have predicted this, another official says (Attanasio et al. 2019).¹⁵ The inability to understand trauma as a functional, organizational tool of settler colonial violence amplifies the impact of traumatic experience on specific populations, not by accident, but by design.

Another motif in western conceptions of trauma has been trauma's redemptive value. Much of psychoanalysis, some of phenomenology, and all of the western existential tradition find some positive value in trauma, even when it is characterized as unassailable personal despair. This is because trauma is said to be a possible gateway to authentic self-knowledge and personal transformation (again, the logic of individuation at play), and even thought to yield philosophical insights into the very heart of the human condition. Take, for instance, Robert Stolorow's (2007) self-analysis of trauma and the subsequent advice he gave a patient:

I recalled my feeling at the conference dinner as though I were an alien to the normals around me. In Gadamer's terms, I was certain that the horizons of their experience could never encompass mine, and this conviction was the source of my alienation and solitude, of the unbridgeable gulf separating me from their understanding. It is not that the traumatized and the normals live in different worlds; it is that these discrepant worlds are felt to be essentially and ineradicably incommensurable [...] this is the legacy of your experiences with terrible trauma. You know that any moment those you love can be struck down by a senseless, random event. Most people don't really know that (15-16).

The implicit white and abled social location of 'most people' and 'normals' is important here. Indigenous people and people of color do not, generally, agree that "most people don't really know" that they and their loved ones can be struck down at any moment and for any reason. When I was growing up, one of the first stories my mother taught me—after she taught me a four-digit proof of life code and singable emergency phone contact—was a story that her father told her. She said, "He sat me down when I was your age and told me, I do not want to die before you grow up. But it is possible and you and your siblings must prepare. And you may die before me. I would be very sad, but I would go on. You have to understand how to go on." She repeated that last part often. Years later, I told the story to an American therapist when asked to relay my earliest memories. She quickly diagnosed the exchange as child abuse. I wondered for the first time about the range of pathologizing techniques used to contain and erase marginalized people's tactics of survival against colonial violence. If there is something traumatizing in this narrative, it is not the powerful lesson of survival in the name of what Kyle Whyte (2018) calls "collective continuance." Rather, it is the intergenerational impact of the reliance on colonial deficiency narratives about our powerlessness to change things, a reliance that trades on a logic of woundedness, hurt, and fear whose function is to stunt coordinated action against the systemic violences we face. What is traumatic is the structurally-enabled use of trauma discourses to disarm strategies of refusal—our refusal to be systematically disappeared or to accept anything less than the reclamation of what is rightfully ours—our lives, our

safety, our well-being in our personhood and our communities, and, in Indigenous contexts, having stolen lands rematriated and uncoerced treaties honored.

This is one way that concepts of trauma that acknowledge the non-accidental nature of structural violence can be helpful—by normalizing positions of political resistance rather than simply teaching how to cope with and accept *structured* loss in the name of narrative wholeness. This latter strategy, which is an all too common method in western mental health care and social work, is a normative violence aimed at finishing what colonialism started.¹⁶ As my mother knew intuitively, psychic trust is not deserved in settler colonial contexts.¹⁷ Native feminist scholar Dian Million (Dine) explains: “given the history between Indigenous peoples and settler states, *no safe place has been obtainable*. Mistrust *should be* a feature of appropriate mental health in Indian Country” (2013:90, first emphasis added). For Indigenous peoples and people of color living within landscapes terraformed by settler colonialism, *there is no safety*, and recognizing this fact is necessary to our survival. Yet passing this knowledge on intergenerationally in the name of collective continuance is pathologized within the very mental health frameworks that claim universal application to our trauma while simultaneously delinking it from the structures that produce it consistently, predictively, and by design.

Million’s account of therapeutic care frameworks in settler colonial societies is critical to the notion of trauma as a non-accidental, organized violence. In *Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights* (2013), Million questions “the healing industry” in Canada and the United States that functionalizes violence against Indigenous peoples in the name of humanitarianism and human rights advocacy. There are two sides to the settler healing coin, but both license western intervention in Native people’s lives. On the one hand, Indigenous peoples are often portrayed as *terminally* traumatized by the wounds inflicted on them by settler colonialism, as injured beyond repair. When those who suffer the logic of wounding are not white, pathology is typically the first response.¹⁸ On the other hand, Million points out that when Indigenous peoples are not seen as terminally wounded but rather as possible subjects contained within the logic of individuation, they are treated as “painfully subscribed *subjects for healing*” (102, emphasis added). In other words, they are identified as sites for legitimate state and cultural intervention, whether in the form of forced state residential schooling or aid recipients for humanitarian development. Trauma is the “preferred language” of international human rights instruments in the aftermath of globalization and the rise of neoliberal market economies, where development metrics and humanitarianism meld into frameworks intended to empower the disenfranchised (178). On both accounts, the western legal positioning of victims prevails. The objective is never to disappear the traumatic suffering Indigenous peoples encountered as a result of intersecting violences, but to disappear Native lives altogether. This follows Wolfe’s notion of the logic of elimination, which analyzes “what might be called the settler-colonial will, a historical force that ultimately derives from the primal drive to expansion,” a “greedy dynamic [that]is internal and self-generating” (167). Elimination is strategic because it aims to vacate Indian lands and render them available for settlement (29). On this account, trauma narratives can easily trigger calls for humanitarian emergencies that are coordinated by settler colonial cultures, not unlike the engineered Bengal famines of 1770 and 1943 that killed millions of Bengalese under colonial British administration. This does not mean that marginalized peoples have been passive

recipients of structurally violent surroundings (McKittrick 2006), but rather that our surroundings have been shaped to deflect the realities of our experiences with structured trauma.

One thing to take away from this analysis is that simply expanding western trauma models and provision care to include experiences of injury and colonial violence from Indigenous communities and people of color is not an appropriate response.¹⁹ Such an attempt to make existing understandings of trauma more inclusive would simply constitute what Ezgi Sertler (forthcoming) calls a “recognition bluff.” A type of administrative violence, according to Sertler, a recognition bluff is a “form of misrecognition where administrative systems enable new categories of legibility promising recognition for certain populations while, at the same time, they limit that category in ways that harm those populations.” Consider that none of the mainstream approaches to trauma recognize the strategic elimination of referential networks of lands, rivers, plants, animal life (Maracle 2015), the intergenerational sexual abuse of children in residential State schools, the systemic targeting and elimination of anti-violence leaders like Maricela, or the banality of femicide and normalized impunity over organized disappearances of women as phenomena that can be encompassed under the logic of wounding. Widening the net of existing western understandings of trauma would thus merely ‘include’ more people under the category of those who have experienced trauma while continuing to limit the category of trauma in ways that uphold the logics of elimination and containment. As a normative violence, accounts of traumas to narrative life do not generally account for the history of organized violence against forms of narrativity that are not western. It’s settler epistemology all the way down. This does not mean we’ve been epistemically colonized and there is nothing left of our cultures (the colonial dream of trauma). It does mean there are great epistemic labors and untallied epistemic exploitations (Berenstain 2016) that must be accounted for in discussions of trauma, including intergenerational trauma.

Perhaps one of the most promising frameworks for addressing the structured and systemic nature of gender-based violence in our communities arose in the post-Holocaust discourses of historical trauma and intergenerational trauma. The framework produced directly addressed injurious effects to whole communities across generations rather than just to individuals. In the *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955), Aimé Césaire famously connected the logic of colonial violence with fascism, arguing that the racist logics of elimination perpetrated by Nazi Germany were first developed and perfected on colonized peoples. His concern was not that global moral horror over the Holocaust was misplaced, but that the moral outrage of humanism is “sordidly racist” (36); it recognized the pain of subjects *already recognized as subjects* (because they are white) while ignoring the pain and suffering of non-white peoples under the colonial regime and its aftermath. This logic still exists today. Consider that in an entire contemporary book-length philosophical treatment on trans-generational trauma (Grand and Salberg, 2017) that specifically takes up “dialogues across history and difference,” grapples with the “ghosts of our forebears” and promotes the idea that “to heal human suffering, we often need to reclaim our elders,” there is not a single reference to Native Americans. Not one. This isn’t laughable, it’s consistent.²⁰

The logic of wounding even underlies many contemporary accounts of structural violence. Consider Johan Galtung’s (1969) definition structural violence as “violence that results in harm but is not

caused by a clearly identifiable actor”—a definition that has had a significant impact on international organizations such as UNESCO and WHO and that also influences the CDC and contemporary public health research on inequality. In a study of differential outcomes for patients living in trauma deserts, defined as areas where a level I or II trauma center is more than 1 hour away by car, researchers (unsurprisingly) concluded that race was a strong predictor of worse trauma outcomes (Sossenheimer 2018). For the researchers, this constituted structural violence, which they defined as the contingent “social arrangements that put individuals and populations in harm’s way” but which have “*no identifiable aggressors*,” “does not involve physical act” and cannot be seen as “intentional” (537-8, emphasis added). Serious genealogical whitewashing work has gone into rendering social structures as arbitrary sets of relations that are as accidental as they are historically contingent. Indigenous social theory and anti-colonial approaches to intergenerational trauma (Brave Heart 1998; Million 2013; Linklater 2014; Fellner 2018; Methot 2019) have addressed this issue by linking settler colonial violence to the modalities of stress-inducing social, institutional, and cultural violences in marginalized people’s lives. Trauma, when functionalized through institutions, is designed to finish what violent colonial settlement started—to consolidate the program of colonial techniques of violence that began in brutalizing physical as well as epistemic and hermeneutic violences. The goal is to dispossess Native peoples of lands and resources, exploit racialized labor (including gendered racialized labor) for surplus profit, and contain resistance through gender-based violences and their normalization. Colonial violence contains and pathologizes resistance through institutional violence, so that there is always functional complicity within settler colonial institutions. One way this is done is by instilling fear through the ongoing possibility of retraumatization. *Operation Janus*, the Trump administration’s most recent anti-immigrant policy agenda instrument aimed at broadening the reach of denaturalization (i.e. revoked citizenship), is one example. If an immigrant woman obtains citizenship through marriage legally and suffers intimate partner violence, she is forever wedded to her abuser through the lifelong possibility they could fabricate claims of entering into a false marriage among myriad other possible accusations, extortions, and abuses.

The idea that a racialized woman is able to produce evidence that can be deemed satisfactory under an epistemic economy based on 500+ years of native informancy is weak at best. Tortured asylum seekers have borne their mutilated bodies in U.S. asylum credibility interviews and U.S. citizens have produced empirical proof such as birth certificates, social security cards, biometrics, and all have been to no avail in proving the legitimacy of their claims. This is the reality we face in *settler credibility economies*. As Emma LaRocque explains in “Here are our Voices—Who Will Hear?” “It was not that they had been silent; it was not that they hadn’t spoken. They were not heard. But ‘heard’ is a complexity... [First Nation’s] statements were widely known *but had no weight as any publicly accepted truth*” (paraphrased in Million, 93, emphasis added). The traumatizing impact of these hermeneutic practices is not tragic, the result of unforeseeable forces, but structured and strategic to harm some people but not others. The level of perpetual structural anxiety this supports also makes it difficult to address issues of past violence, abuse, and survivorship amongst women of color immigrants. While one should not lose sight that this precarity is *structurally engineered*, through policy and law, this insight also adds a layer of complexity to discussions of structural trauma by having to recenter settler colonial configurations of birthright and belonging in racialized immigrant women’s fight against spousal abuse. The function of trauma in this case is to create conditions of perpetual precarity and vulnerability that work to

disappear those who resist settler formation of social life, thus centering violence on those who transgress colonial gender binaries, such as racialized women, and nonbinary, trans, and two-spirit people.

Conceptual approaches to practical problems, however promising, can lose track of the material details central to organizing resistance to violence: the names, dates, causes of death, the families left behind, suspended in life but unable to die without knowing where the bodies are. The statistics can be given. They have been given, the evidence entered.²¹ In many cases, compelling physical evidence has been used to sentinel impending violence: Before Maricela was murdered, she had received numerous death threats. Members of her family also received them before they, too, were killed. And Before Maricela, Gisela Mota Ocampo was sworn in as the first female Mayor of Temixco, only to be slain later that day—shot at home in front of her family. She too, had received numerous threats. And before Gisela, Tiquicheo Mayor, María Santos Gorrostieta Salazar survived two assassination attempts—one of which claimed her husband’s life— before being tortured and slain in front of her young daughter. Over a hundred mayors have been murdered in Mexico alone, and tens of thousands of Indigenous women and women of color have been murdered or disappeared across Turtle Island in the last few years. If enumerating our losses were enough to produce justice, more of us would do that critical work. But there exists a systemic design-of-distribution to the way our losses shake out that continues to underlie our attempts to address systemic violence— why tremendous public resources are often utilized to address sexual assault, kidnapping, and murder when it happens to some populations and not others. On paper, Mexico has some of the most progressive policies against gender-based violence (see “General Law on Women’s Access to A Life Free of Violence”). Day-to-day life, however, is quite different than official policy in settler cultures. New fertile lines of force (*forvis*) are generated to serve as enforcement mechanisms when older uses of force and violence become obsolete or illegal within settler legal systems. In a recent gang-rape case in Veracruz, a girl’s rapists were recorded on a Facebook Live video confessing to the assault they perpetrated, with some claiming remorse for their actions. Refusing to press charges after watching the video, the state prosecutor argued that what he saw and heard was not a confession but an *apology*. It is not incidental that the accused perpetrators were white, just as it is not incidental that municipalities with the greatest rates of impunity for these crimes are places where tourism, natural resources, petrochemical and extractive industries are centered. Force and enforcement come together in the logic of wounding when the protection and regeneration of settler wealth is at stake. This is because trauma operates within a settler colonial architecture oriented towards the basic reproduction of social structures for transmitting intergenerational wealth amongst white settlers and their descendants. Periodt.

This work takes a toll on us, and reframing problems in different lights can help address our own enraged pain as feminist scholars of violence. Not theoretical violence. Real violence, harms, and injuries. Reframing the phenomenological experience of precarity and vulnerability in racialized gender-based violence from a structural perspective can help in this direction.²² Such a reframe rejects the idea of tragedy as inherently blameless, disassociated from organized efforts to enforce colonial relations through social transformations by structuring the conditions for loss. As Shannon Speed notes, “formulating violence against women as purely interpersonal phenomena only serves to de-politicize gender violence. Individual or interpersonal gender violence cannot be understood

outside of the historical and ideological structures that give rise to it and in which it is enacted” (2019, 286). Structural trauma, on this view, is a functional, organizational tool of settler colonial violence that amplifies the impact of traumatic experience on specific populations by design. It calls for an end to narratives of trauma that are severed from the settler colonial project of Native land dispossession and genocide. It also calls for divestment from the logics of traumatology that recenter the founding myths and tacit values of Anglo-European culture. Structural trauma then is a methodological pivot for conducting trauma-based gender-based violence research in an anti-colonial context. It is not a new approach but a reaffirmation of what Indigenous, Black, and Brown feminisms have contended for centuries about the non-accidental role of gender-based violence in the consolidation of the colonial project: it is a structural phenomenon.

References

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1987. *Borderlands/La Frontera*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books.
- Attanasio, Cedar, Jake Bleiberg and Paul Weber. “Police: El Paso Shooting Suspect Said he Targeted Mexicans,” *Associated Press*. August 9, 2019.
- Bassett, Deborah et al. 2012. ““Our culture is medicine”: perspectives of Native healers on posttrauma recovery among American Indian and Alaska Native patients.” *The Permanente journal* vol. 16 (1): 19-27.
- Beardsworth, Sara. 2009. “Overcoming the Confusion of Loss and Trauma: The Need of Thinking Historically.” In *The Trauma Controversy*, eds. Kristen Brown Golden and Bettina Bergo. Albany, New York: SUNY: 45-70.
- Berenstain, Nora. 2016. “Epistemic Exploitation”. *Ergo: An Open Access Journal in Philosophy*. Vol. 3 (22). DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/ergo.12405314.0003.022>
- Bowen, Elizabeth and Nadine Murshid. 2016. “Trauma-Informed Social Policy: A Conceptual Framework for Policy Analysis and Advocacy.” *American Journal of Public Health*, no. 106: 223-229, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2015.302970>
- Brave Heart, Maria Yellow Horse & Lemyra DeBruyn. 1998. “The American Indian Holocaust: Healing Historical Unresolved Grief.” *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research*, 8(2): 60–82.
- Brison, Susan. 2002. *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Carson, Anne. 2006. “Tragedy: A Curious Art Form,” in *Greif Lessons, Four Plays by Euripides*, trans. Anne Carson. New York: NYRB Classics: 7-9.
- Cénat et al. 2018. “Multiple traumas and resilience among street children in Haiti: Psychopathology of survival.” *Child Abuse Neglect*. No. 79:85-97. doi: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.01.024.
- Césaire, Aimé. 2000. *Discourse on Colonialism*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Chemaly, Soraya. 2019. *Rage becomes her the power of women's anger*. New York: Atria Books.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 2017. “Simone de Beauvoir, Women’s Oppression and Existential Freedom,” in *A Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, eds. Laura Hengehold and Nancy Bauer. Blackwell: 325-338.

- Cooper, Brittany. 2018. *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers her Superpower*, New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Deer, Sarah. 2015. *The Beginning and End of Rape*. Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press.
- Diamond, Stephen. 2006. *Anger, madness and the daimonic: The psychological genesis of violence, evil, and creativity*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Dotson, Kristie. 2017. "Theorizing Jane Crow, Theorizing Unknowability." *Social Epistemology*, 31(5): 417-430. DOI: 10.1080/02691728.2017.1346721
- Dotson, Kristie. 2017b. "On the Way to Decolonization in a Settler Colony: Re-Introducing Black Feminist Identity Politics." *AlterNative*. 14(3):190-199.
- Fellner, Karlee. 2018. "Therapy as Ceremony: Decolonizing and Indigenizing Our Practice". In: Arthur N. (eds) *Counselling in Cultural Contexts*. Springer. DOI: doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-00090-5_8
- Fregoso, Rosa Linda. 2003. *MeXicana Encounters: The Making of Social Identities on the Borderlands*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Fregoso, Rosa Linda and Cynthia Bejarano (eds.). 2010 *Terrorizing Women: Femicide in the Americas*. Durham, NC: Duke UP.
- Galtung, Johan. 1969. "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research". *Journal of Peace Research*, 6 (3): 167-191.
- Grand, Sue and Jill Sanlerg (eds.) 2017. *Trans-generational Trauma and the Other: Dialogues across history and difference*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Linklater, Renee. 2014. *Decolonizing Trauma Work: Indigenous Stories and Strategies*. Vancouver, B.C.: Fernwood Publishing.
- Lorde, Audre. 1981. The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism. *Women's Studies Quarterly* 25(1/2): 278-85.
- Marcos, Subcomandante Insurgente, Nick Henck, and Henry Gales. 2018. *The Zapatista's Dignified Rage: Final Public Speeches of Subcommander Marcos*. AK Press.
- Maracle, Lee. 2015. *Memory Serves*. Alberta, B.C.: NeWest Press.
- McKittrick, Katherine. 2006. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and The Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis MN: Minnesota University Press.
- Methot, Suzanne. 2019. *Legacy: Trauma, story and Indigenous healing*. Toronto, ECW Press.
- Million, Dian. 2013. *Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Rights*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press.
- Moeke-Pickering, Taima. 2019. "Indigenous Worldviews and Pedagogies in Indigenous-Based Programs: Social Work and Counselling". In Hameed, S., El-Kafafi, S., & Waretini-Karena, R. (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Indigenous Knowledge and Bi-Culturalism in a Global Context*. IGI Global: 1-10. <http://doi:10.4018/978-1-5225-6061-6.ch001>
- Pember, Mary Annette. 2016. *Intergenerational trauma: understanding Natives' inherited pain*. *Indian Country Today*.
- Ritchie, Andrea. 2017. *Invisible No More: Police Violence against Black Women and Women of Color*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Rodriguez, Tori. 2015. "Descendants of Holocaust Survivors Have Altered Stress Hormones". *Scientific American Mind*. 26 (2): 10.
- Ruíz, Elena. (forthcoming). "Cultural Gaslighting," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*.

- Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, “General Law on Women’s Access to A Life Free of Violence,”
 Accessible at
http://www.summit-americas.org/brief/docs/Law_on_access_to_a_life_free_violence.pdf
- Sertler, Ezgi. (forthcoming). “Calling Recognition Bluffs: Structural Epistemic Injustice and Administrative Violence.” In *Epistemic Injustice and the Philosophy of Recognition*, eds. Paul Giladi and Nicola McMillan. New York: Routledge.
- Sertler, Ezgi. (forthcoming). “Epistemic Dependence and Oppression: A Telling Relationship.” *Episteme*.
- Simpson, Audra. 2007. “Ethnographic Refusal: Indigeneity, ‘Voice’ and Colonial Citizenship.” *Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue*. No. 9: 67–80.
- Sossenheimer PH, Andersen MJ Jr, MH Clermont, CV Hoppenot, AA Palma, and Rogers SO Jr. 2018. "Structural Violence and Trauma Outcomes: An Ethical Framework for Practical Solutions". *Journal of the American College of Surgeons*. 227 (5): 537-542.
- Speed, Shannon. 2017. “Structures of Settler Capitalism in Abya Yala,” *American Quarterly*, 69 (4): 783-790.
- Speed, Shannon. 2019. *Incarcerated stories: Indigenous women migrants and violence in the settler-capitalist state*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Stolorow, Robert. 2007. *Trauma and Human Existence*. Routledge.
- Tuck, Eve. and K. Wayne Yang. 2012. “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*. Vol 1 (1): 1-40.
- Valles, Sean. 2018. *Philosophy of Population Health: Philosophy for a New Public Health Era*, Routledge.
- Whyte, Kyle. 2018. “Critical Investigations of Resilience,” *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, no. 147 (2): 136-147.
- Williams, David R, and Selina A Mohammed. 2013. “Racism and Health I: Pathways and Scientific Evidence.” *The American behavioral scientist*. vol. 57 (8): 10. doi:10.1177/0002764213487340
- Wolfe, Patrick. 1999. *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event*, London, Cassell.
- Wolfe, Patrick. 2006. “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* (8) 4: 387-409.

Notes

¹ Michigan State University occupies the ancestral, traditional, and contemporary Lands of the Anishinaabeg – Three Fires Confederacy of Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi peoples.

² This became particularly important for psychoanalysis, which refined the association between wounding and subjectivity in the notions of original trauma and constitutive loss (Beardsworth 2019: 45). The notion of individuation is not exclusive to western culture, yet in the west it developed through particular epistemological and metaphysical commitments to a) exclusionary logic (see, for example, Aristotle’s laws of thought) and b) *non-reciprocal* dualisms, and it is these commitments that pillared the rise of the particular model of modern individualism that underlies settler colonial cultures. While the principle of individuation (*principium individuationis*) took on slight variations in ecclesiastic, existential, and post-renaissance notions of selfhood, they did not uproot the core of these commitments. One important consequence of the metaphysical and epistemological orthodoxies rooted in this view was the conceptual pre-development of hierarchical binaries that allowed for clear and neat

-
- differentiations between alleged ‘races’ as opposing in form and/or kind to one another. This is an example of the conceptual schemata that organizes social concepts pre-structurally.
- ³ Tragedy and trauma thus entered the *affective* realm of pain, where Euripides’s *Trojan Women* dwelt, rather than a political realm that worked to directly dismantle organized violence against women. While affects can be powerfully political (see Lorde 1981; Chemaly 2018; Cooper 2018), the western intellectual tradition that encompasses Attic tragedy sought to contain organized resistance to state violence by internalizing conflicts, linking human agency to this internalization, and redirecting affects to this experience. Simultaneously, institutions were set up to formalize affects as public goods reserved for certain people and to function as sites for regulating the affective behavior of others. Delicts in Roman law, for instance, carefully outlined how “outrage” as an injury (*Iniuria*) from a perceived insult were grievable harms by slave owners, but not slaves. This pattern continues today and can be found across a range of settler social institutions, from systemically racist pushout policies in education that target the behavior of girls of color for punishment, to the disparate dispensation of damages awarded for emotional injury in libel, defamation, and discrimination suits (cf. *Johnson v. Strive E. Harlem Emp’t Grp*, *MacMillan v. Millennium Broadway Hotel*, *Cosmos Forms, Ltd. v. State Div. of Human Rights*, and *Laboy v. Office Equip. & Supply Corp* for cases where courts lower original damages awards and discuss the “N-word” as “garden variety” mental harms—a legal notion that in these cases is tied to the presumptive limited evidentiary value of Black plaintiff’s testimony about their own affective lives).
- ⁴ It should be noted that the conceptual shift argued for in this paper is one that advocates and depends on a *coalitional* approach to solidarity among Indigenous feminisms and women of color feminisms, rather than one that collapses them or simplifies their political, geographic, and historical complexity. For more on interhemispheric structural feminisms, feminist anti-colonial visions of coalition, and contingent collaborations, see Speed 2016 & 2019, Dotson 2017b, and Tuck et al. 2014.
- ⁵ Well-known challenges to Nobel-Peace-Prize recipient Rigoberta Menchú Tum’s testimony of Indigenous genocide provide one powerful example of this process. See also Kristie Dotson’s (2017) notion of “epistemic backgrounding” for further insight into the mechanisms, processes, and functionalization of settler colonial violences in epistemic practices, as well as her important discussion of “epistemic power” and its cultural accumulation (2018). See also Ezgi Sertler’s (forthcoming) account of *structural epistemic dependence*, in which she theorizes how people and communities rely on background structures’ practices of managing knowledge and ignorance when they come to know something.
- ⁶ The Institutes of Justinian law, from where we get the term ‘institution’ (from Latin *instituire* -- to set up, establish custom), formalized customs specific to *conditions of war*--the taking of live prisoners to extract profit in return for sparing their lives (from where the term *slave* derives) into an internal regulative social practice. Institutions, on this view, were never value-free social phenomena or blank-slate structures universal across all cultures, but social formations set up to functionalize specific mechanisms of regulative power, like racial and gendered violence, for particular ends.
- ⁷ This is one way inequality is sustained in democratic societies that depend on settler colonial social structures for the production of wealth: the reliance on pre-structural conceptual schemata that uphold the unequal distribution of social goods through the power conferred to public institutions. Legal criterion for the right to sue for an injury (*locus standi*), the rights and immunities in castle doctrines, stand-your-ground laws, and other developments of common law illustrate this.
- ⁸ The logic of wounding tied to white settler populations, by contrast, uses the logic of individuation positively to create functional pathways for accessing infrastructural support from settler institutions like the legal system.
- ⁹ The concept of ‘the logic of containment’ is useful here because it shows how colonial violence traversed various settler conceptual and biocultural strategies (such as the creation of controlling racial taxonomies) to achieve unified goals of providing enduring wealth for white lineages of settlement. It upends the settler conceptual schemata of racialization that controlled Black labor through (among other things) the one-drop rule, exploited Brown labor through reverse one-drop rules of Spanish blood, and dispossessed Native peoples of their lands through genocidal violence, spatial containment, and blood quantum rules. Containment and elimination are thus not mutually exclusive, even in the logic of containment’s negative uses of force as non-containment and impunity for violence. This is illustrated in the staggering rates of sexual violence and forced disappearance Native women face, but also in the

structured impunity of non-Native perpetrators who rape Native women on Native lands (as is illustrated by the fact that more than two thirds of rapes against Native women are perpetrated by non-Native men).

- ¹⁰ This is an example of the ‘leveling down’ settler epistemic concern. See Valles, 2018: 171-172.
- ¹¹ Some of these texts, such as Susan Brison’s landmark work, *Aftermath*, have been critical in the healing processes of individuals recovering from experiences of violence, especially rape. They have helped survivors make sense of experiences that were meant to undo us as individuals, to inflict a terror that has both a bodily object and that proceeds in time without one-- a dizzying and dislocating feeling. This account can also be found in Gloria Anzaldúa’s work and the idea of “intimate terrorism” in mestizas’ psychic life (1987). The concern is thus not with what these texts do or don’t do, it is with a wider structured inattention to how trauma has been used strategically as an institutional technology to consolidate colonial dispossession, whether in feminist theory or elsewhere.
- ¹² Many have fought against this delinking and reconnected the strings between racist sexism, colonial violence, and our pain. Cf. Indigenous Zapatista’s speeches (Marcos 2018) on “dignified rage” and Brittney Cooper’s *Eloquent Rage* (2018).
- ¹³ This was a shaky time politically, with renewed calls for oligarchical rule in the aftermath of the Peloponnesian war and the need to contain the helot uprisings since the second Messenian War.
- ¹⁴ For example, in a recent episode of “Black Mirror,” a 22-year old Black man is violently kidnapped at gunpoint by a white middle-aged man who killed his own fiancé and the driver of another vehicle while texting and driving, admittedly, out of sheer boredom. Unable to accept the outcome of his actions, he brutalizes and psychologically tortures his victim in order to attract the attention of the social media company he blames for addicting him to his phone. The script culminates in a late-staged apology to his victim. What is staged is not the apology, but the response: a hokey, *oh that’s ok!* This is emblematic of the staging and restaging of (non)resistance to organized trauma. It has a function. And the mechanism is not just settler cinema (a modern version of tragic plays) and aesthetics, but education as well. Trauma has always been designed to create a pathos of distance from pain for some populations, so that others acquiesce and mirror what Amphitryon says to Lykos in Euripides’s play, *Herakles*: “our death is your decree, we acquiesce. It must be as you say.” But we do not acquiesce. This is why it is not accidental that *Birth of a Nation* maintains a near perfect (98%) critic score, for as long as there is resistance to the consolidation of the settler colonial project, resistance will be met with wide and ever-expansive nets of interconnected force.
- ¹⁵ One important point of these appeals to tragedy is to avoid broadening the reach of *Iniuria*. The 1989 Exxon-Valdez oil spill and other man-made disasters, for example, are similarly portrayed as environmental ‘tragedies’ to prevent Indigenous peoples harmed by structurally foreseeable consequences of human actions from seeking relief in response to injury, especially through settler legal mechanisms.
- ¹⁶ This differs, for example, from calls to politicize deaths from gun violence, particularly on social media outlets. (The #IfIDieInaMassShooting campaign sought to mobilize efforts against the gun lobby and lax regulations of rapid-fire weaponry through the slogan “If I die in a mass shooting, politicize my death”.)
- ¹⁷ Moreover, the elitist idea that most people don’t really know about the worldly precarities they face is built on the settler colonial assumption that the world is generally a *safe place* that is worthy of trust until an unexpected, tragic event disrupts that tacit expectation of temporal flow through the fragmenting effects of trauma. This assumption of safeness is not rooted in universal normative grounds, such as in the idea that all children deserve to feel safe and physically secure in the world around them, but in the premise that the spatial and temporal coordinates around one *already belong to one’s cultural tradition, giving one pre-reflective access to its interpretive resources*. This is the other side of the hermeneutic violence coin: that settler populations accumulate interpretive wealth for epistemic *profit* (See Ruíz, forthcoming).
- ¹⁸ Patricia Hill Collins (2017) points out this aspect of Simone de Beauvoir’s work when Beauvoir portrays Black Americans (and U.S. Black women in particular) as pathologically traumatized by slavery, almost irredeemably broken as possible subjects of freedom.
- ¹⁹ A recent study of PTSD in orphaned and homeless Haitian children who “experienced multiple traumas such as neglect, maltreatment, psychological, physical and sexual abuse” failed to obtain scores reaching clinical rates for PTSD for any more than 15% of the children studied (Cénat et al 2018). The

conclusion: Haitian “street children” are incredibly resilient, wherein “a large majority presented a level of resilience between moderate to very high” (ibid). While Haitian children are undoubtedly resilient, the discourse of resilience is often applied to structurally traumatized populations to produce what Tuck and Yang (2012) call a “settler move to innocence” that attempts to escape complicity in creating and maintaining colonial violences that force people to become resilient or die. As Williams and Mohammed (2013) have shown, resilience comes with a high cost; it has measurable health effects that contribute to population-level health inequities that not all populations face (See also Bassett et al. 2012).

²⁰ In 2015, geneticist Rachel Yehuda led a team of researchers from Mount Sinai in a series of studies that showed descendants of Holocaust survivors have altered stress hormones that impact their ability to “bounce back” from stress or illness, particularly PTSD (Rodriguez 2015). Native geneticist LeManuel ‘Lee’ Bitsoi (Navajo) aptly notes that epigeneticists’ recent findings of historical traumas are hardly news to Native Americans, as “Native healers, medicine people and elders have always known this and it is common knowledge in Native oral traditions” (qtd. in Pember 2017).

²¹ Rosa-Linda Fregoso (2003, 2010), for example, has powerfully laid out the case for asymmetry and siege in the torture and killing of Brown and Indigenous women. Her work has been critical to feminist efforts to stem the tide of femicide and forced disappearances of Mexican women and to linking gender-based violence with structural violence. Victoria Sanford’s forensic anthropological work documenting mass graves has also been important in this regard.

²² In “Trauma-Informed Social Policy: A Conceptual Framework for Policy Analysis and Advocacy” (2016) Elizabeth Bowen and Nadine Murshid apply the principles of trauma-informed care (“conceptualized as an organizational change process centered on principles intended to promote healing and reduce the risk of retraumatization for vulnerable individuals”) to social policy (223). Bowen and Murshid’s proposal can prove helpful in developing examples of incidence approaches to trauma if structures are understood as non-accidental relations between elements in settler societies rather than objectively neutral sets of social relations.