

Meera Atkinson

The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma

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Reviewed by Mara Miller, 2019

The contribution Meera Atkinson makes with *The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma* goes far beyond the feminist literary analysis of seven of our most probing recent literary works: Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006), Helene Cixous's fictional memoir *Hyperdream* (2009), Alexis Wright's 2006 novel *Carpentaria*, Pat Barker's *Regeneration Trilogy* (1999)--comprised of the three novels *Regeneration*, *The Eye in the Door*, and *The Ghost Road*--and Alexis Wright's 2013 novel *The Swan Book*. Atkinson's project is to "perform an interdisciplinary examination of complex cultural operations through the portal of selected texts" (116) and to place front and center within trauma theory and literary theory the situations of women, the colonized and disenfranchised, and others whom patriarchal agents and assemblages deny. She challenges the view that family violence and suicide, especially when connected to gender discrimination, are adequately recognized, and can be dealt with appropriately, when they are understood as individual effects and responsibilities and/or "treated as aberrations in an otherwise healthy society" (1). Rather, she wants to recognize through the study of works presenting such violence that, for instance, in the cases of maternal violence that so fascinate our media, "murderous maternal anger is a symptom of a 'darker, deeper violence that systematically constitutes motherhood as a patriarchal institution' . . . [and that] [t]hese deplorable crimes are examples of 'violence by and to the mother'" (2). Atkinson asks: "Why and how is it, then, that attention is so routinely diverted from the operations surrounding and generating such 'tragedies'? And what is necessary to break this trance?" (2).

It is larger than motherhood, of course, and larger, even, than gender. It encompasses the interrelations of colonized and otherwise marginalized peoples with hegemonic peoples, and also relations with other species. Atkinson is admirably aware of the ways oppressions layer:

[J]ust as patriarchy, imperialism, and capitalism have thrived on the overlapping oppressions and discriminations around gender, race, class, species etc., so too must the restitution of such oppressions, discriminations, and traumas involve an introjectory intervention aware of intersected injustices and their transgenerational impact. (146)

Atkinson's aim is deeper, more far-reaching, "a more ambitious venture" (82) than the comprehension of literature and the exemplification of theory. It is nothing less than the transformation of society. This can be made possible, she believes, through the poetics of transgenerational trauma, which is writing that is

[c]haracterized by an uncanny ability to reveal the operations of trauma in ways that exceed it as thematic content, . . . in which traumatic familial experience--for my purposes defined as the traumatic events or experiences of one generation *passed down to another*, or traumatic events or experiences within the bounds of the family, or, more commonly, a combination of the two--appears as crucially connected to, and reflective of, social reality. (50; my italics)

("Haunted" texts, however, often exceed the boundaries of family transmission. See below.)

Her examination of literary methods in twenty-first-century literature aims to show how allowing ourselves to feel the effects of transgenerational trauma along with the characters we are reading about can help us recover--thereby allowing us to instigate the social transformation we badly need. She says, "I argue that affective-ethical encounter [which I take to mean the affective empathy with literary characters that enables us to recognize their pain, their needs, their subjectivity and agency] is capable of producing an increase of subjective and social power through a textual reckoning with trauma within and beyond the family" (50). In Spinoza's and Deleuze's affective ethics, "ethical action is determined by the needs of a given being . . . contrasted with the imposition of externally defined and predetermined moralistic frameworks based on notions such as 'good' and 'evil,' 'right' and 'wrong'" (51). (Surprisingly, she does not refer to the feminist care ethics of Carol Gilligan [1982] and others after her.)

The Plan of the Book: Works Read and the Theoretical Framework

The introduction situates the study within the work of a number of feminist theorists (principally Judith Butler, Helene Cixous, Jane Gallop, Julia Kristeva, and Adrienne Rich), and especially psychoanalysis and trauma studies (not only Freud, and Cathy Caruth's seminal 1995 *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, but also Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, Jill Bennett, Colin Davis, Gilles Deleuze, Judith Herman, and Russell Meares; she takes issue with Ruth Leys on a number of points). She includes the work of literary scholar Anna Gibbs, and research on testimony and witnessing, such as Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man* (1959). Her introduction situates the theory within exigencies of real-life current traumas, buttressed by statistics. Her plan for recovery, however, depends upon Spinoza's affect ethics (also espoused by Deleuze).

The feminist foundation for the study emerges in chapter 1, "*L'écriture Féminine* and the Strange Body," which addresses the strange omission of gender from most discussions of the Holocaust and its related traumas (25),

teas[ing] out the similarities, differences, and intriguing departures between what has been formulated as "feminine writing" and the writing of transgenerational trauma . . . evok[ing] critical considerations around gender and writing in order to show that the poetics of transgenerational trauma is not a straightforwardly gendered writing; rather it is produced via strange-bodied traumatic memory and its affective circulations. (26)

The next four chapters use these theories and a number of others, such as hauntology and cyclic suffering, to elucidate the projects and the achievements of five novels and two memoirs. (Although she acknowledges their potential power, she deliberately excludes from the project critical memoir, fictocriticism, and autoethnography [50].) Chapter 2, "The Ethics of Writing (through) a History of Familial Trauma," "explore[s] the affect-ethics of the 'Spinozan' writer and the dangers of the poetic of transgenerational trauma" (82) through examination of Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* and Helene Cixous's fictional memoir *Hyperdream*.

Moving beyond the narrow confines of the family and the individual's personal history to the multigenerational and communal or tribal, chapter 3, "Hauntology and the Spooked Text," "consider[s] the spectral legacy of colonialism in relation to *Carpentaria* (by [Alexis] Wright 2006)"--a book Atkinson considers a "fierce epic that both honors Indigenous sovereignty and culture and attests to the ravages wrought by colonization"--in order to examine the ways in

which writing and literature can testify to the traumas of colonialism and genocide even centuries after their initial impact (82). *Carpentaria*, she shows, explores "certain characteristics unique to postcolonial testimony, including non-Western perceptions of family, time [including mythical and historical], and reality" (82).

Chapter 4, "Family Snapshots to Big Picture: Cyclical Haunting," expands the scope beyond the boundaries of family and tribe or clan kinship bonds--and the damage done to them by colonizing and genocidal societies--to the trauma of the First World War, investigating Pat Barker's *Regeneration Trilogy*, comprised of the three novels *Regeneration*, *The Eye in the Door*, and *The Ghost Road*." She "highlight[s] the way Barker reveals the multigenerational familial transmission of trauma at the heart of war. The trilogy translates a complex web of personal, cultural, national, and global trauma, and as such it is a creative portrayal of cyclical haunting that shows how the autonomy of traumatic affect circulates in and between assemblages" (122), "assemblages" being the term for groupings "such as families, organizations, nations, and wars . . ." (128), the "wide variety of wholes constructed from heterogeneous parts" "created and stabilized" by historical processes (De Landa 2006, 129). (The concept originates with Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, and is further developed by Massumi, all of whom she cites, but, regrettably--and atypically for her--without providing a clear statement of why, or which theorists she is using.)

One criticism here: given her topic and orientation, it was surprising to find no reference to literary precursors to the books she studied--novels like Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, for example, that, by finding apt literary form (specific forms of stream-of-consciousness) for the ensuing inner chaos, exposed the experience of traumas caused by war and its effects, both cognitive and emotional, much as Picasso and Maruki Iri and Toshi did visually around World War II in *Guernica* and the *Hiroshima Panels*.

Chapter 5, "Provocations beyond the Human," is the most far-reaching. Here Atkinson "stage[s her] own critical intervention around speciesism within trauma and literary theories" (165). Through an examination of Alexis Wright's novel *The Swan Book*, in which animals and the earth itself are traumatized, it asks, "Can large-scale intersected injustices and looming global crises be represented in literature? And if so, might this contribute in some way toward moving people to enact and demand necessary change?" (146).

Intersectionality proves both essential to her understanding and analysis and a potentially revolutionary key to societal transformation, giving us "a framework [for] examination of the ways in which gender, race, class, etc. 'mutually construct one another' rather than treating them as 'distinctive social hierarchies'" (148; Collins 1998, 62), which in the absence of such frameworks are often seen as competing with one another for our attention and our efforts at remediation.

Affect, Personal Recovery, and Social Transformation

Affect, Atkinson claims, is essential to recovery on both the societal and individual levels. This is because, "For Deleuze, and Spinoza before him, ethics involves a capacity for transformation (unlike morality, which is more static and concerned with maintaining an externally constructed code of behavior)" (51). Recovery and transformation are the ultimate objectives of Atkinson's text and of those she analyzes.

To reveal the wider patterns of trauma she is interested in, Atkinson extends the range of this study of trauma in three ways. First, focusing on literary explorations of (various realms of)

trauma and *the empathetic understanding they make possible*, she pushes the definition of trauma beyond that experienced by individuals in their personal history, arguing, "It is crucial to challenge the established clinical and theoretical emphasis on individualistic experience" (159) that is especially important to challenging Eurocentrism, with its "established clinical and theoretical emphasis on individualistic experience" (158).

Second, similarly, she extends the definition of transgenerational trauma beyond the immediate transmissions from one generation to another, placing at the center of the study the phenomenon of cyclical haunting, the ways in which the traumatic past (both our own and that of certain others) lives within us whether we are conscious of it or not. Her use of the term is meant to include both Derrida's specters and Abraham and Torok's phantoms (as explicated by Davis 2005), taking the position, as she says, "that the autonomy of affect [its ability to hold sway outside of intention and consciousness] operates on a number of levels and in ways that make different theoretical views of it useful" (130). Although she begins with the familial (chapter 2), therefore, she goes beyond it to recognize the broadest implications of larger-scale violent/traumatizing social interactions such as war, genocidal social policies--those of History (with a capital "H") as opposed to personal history (small "h")--and extending to the misuse and abuse of the earth and of animals (chapter 5). Utilizing work by Dominick LaCapra, she further distinguishes between traumatic loss (incurred within a personal history, small "h") and absence, often existential and construed personally but nonetheless a "transhistorical absence that is part of the human condition" (133; LaCapra 1999), between History as the broader, widely shared trauma and the individual's or family's personal history.

Finally, recognizing that trauma is transmitted not only by human agency but by nature, and, concomitantly, that human agents perpetrate it on animals and the earth, she expands the definition of trauma so as to take all these contributing, mutually influential vectors into account.

Employing a range of theories and methods, from Spinoza's ethics and psychoanalysis to intersectionality, she deepens the study of literature by recognizing 1) the systemic aspects of trauma even when it takes place on the individual level; 2) the political dimensions of personal trauma and the personal dimensions of political trauma; and 3) the analogies among political terrorism (generally acknowledged as such), violence within the sphere of private relationships, and "normal" political/governmental processes.

Objectives: The Relations between Affect and Ethics

Although Atkinson is interested in "passionately innovative use of language," for instance (170), her larger interests are in the ways

experimental and poetic work . . . helps reconnect us to subjectively and collectively suppressed affect. As Spinoza (1996) argued in his *Ethics* [published in 1677] . . . , affect is indispensable to reasoning and ethical action. Literary encounters with affect unsettle the entrenched and historical denials patriarchal imperialism and saturation capitalism depend on. In this way, its misogyny, racism, speciesism, and other discriminations are confronted and destabilized. (187)

The perception with which she applies theory to the analysis of these specific novels and memoirs makes her analysis invaluable for other literature as well; I am bringing it into my classes on both traditional and modern Japanese literature, particularly insofar as "the poetics of transgenerational trauma witnesses and testifies not only to trauma, but also to the work of

recognizing traumatic gaps within the self and culture and reinstating life within those gaps through the acts of witnessing and living attention" (143). These processes will be crucial, for "[u]ntil humanity adequately grasps the intimate connections between structural, historic and Historic traumatic experience in assemblage the 'elaboration of more desirable social and political institutions and practices' LaCapra calls for cannot be made manifest" (144).

Criticisms

This is a masterful--and fascinating--work. I do have some criticisms, however. Regardless of the sophistication of a book, authors cannot assume all readers will be familiar with (all aspects of) all theoretical concepts (especially since their authors may have deepened or changed their views in different writings); given the range and complexity of theoretical references in this study, each term or concept should have been explained and cited, preferably with the first use, but at the very least in the index, which left out some crucial terms. Other terms are not only left out of the index but left undefined. Forcing us to interrupt the reading of a text as complex as Atkinson's to search for definitions is unfortunate.

If, as Atkinson suggests, "In literary theory, traumatic writing has been positioned as an attempt to liberate the unconscious and speak the unspeakable and the literally unthinkable . . ." (84), it far predates her examples, particularly among female authors, not only Woolf but also Murasaki Shikibu (c. 973-1014 CE). One should do justice to such pioneers by at least referencing their attempts.

Given the complexity of the body of theory Atkinson requires, there is less attention than one might expect to the actual poetic means novelists use. She observes that Wright

invent[ed] a way of writing that could embody both the negative effects of colonialism and her proud Aboriginal heritage. The resulting text is experimental, allegorical, sometimes humorous, and often startlingly lyrical. . . . It features an impossible-to-categorize blend of voices and influences. (83)

But this is a rare instance of analysis of the actual poetics, as opposed to their overall social and psychological effects and their place in the theoretical frameworks. Yet, as she tells us, "The inquiry is not so much whether or not a given text contains "specters": the question is the degree to which the specter is present, *the ways in which it is conjured*, and whether or not it is consciously acknowledged and articulated" (82-83; my italics).

Finally, she adheres to current practice of giving dates for works as their most recent publication date, without reference to the original. Many of us--but not all--know Spinoza didn't publish in the 1990s, but the practice is extremely misleading, and I have heard recent PhDs give completely misleading dates to their classes due to this practice.

Conclusion

Criticisms aside, I hardly know when I have enjoyed a more informative and stimulating book, or one that integrated so much theory in such useful ways. It was, to be sure, a pain in the neck--forcing me to completely revamp an article I was in the middle of writing, and rework my Japanese literature classes as well, making me rethink everything (and prompting a whole new article). Anyone up for such an encounter must read it as soon as possible.

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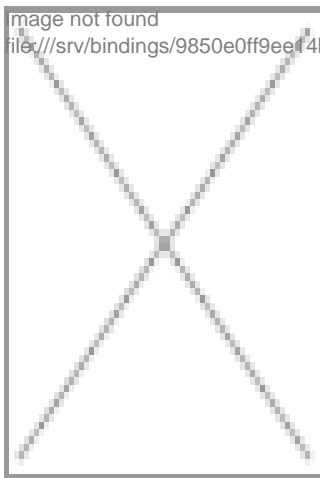
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