

Towards a New Master Narrative of Trauma: A Reading of Terrance Hayes's "American Sonnets for my Past and Future Assassin" and Mustafa Ibrahim's "I Have Seen Today"

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The Egyptian revolutionaries, who in 2011 called for "bread, freedom and social justice," witnessed the shattering of their dream and suffered the pain of being abandoned by the masses and silenced by the post-revolution regime in Egypt. The aim of this article is to explore indications of the creation of a "cultural trauma" (Alexander, "Towards") for the Egyptian revolutionaries through a reading of Mustafa Ibrahim's poem "I Have Seen Today." In order to accomplish this task, this paper will first examine how the cultural trauma of African Americans (Eyerman, *Slavery*) responds to fresh trig-

gers. In Terrance Hayes's "American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin," the election of Donald Trump as US president is the trigger to the older trauma. Comparing Ibrahim's poem to Hayes's aims at underlining the tools used by the Egyptian revolutionaries to create "a new master narrative" of trauma (Alexander, "Towards" 12) that could reconstruct the collective identity and redirect the course of political action.

Keywords: Cultural trauma, Master narrative, Poetry, African American, 2011 Egyptian Revolution

On Cultural Trauma

No matter how numerous the victims of a massive trauma are or what the nature of their suffering is, neither the occurrence of the event nor the realization of its harrowing nature would make it a cultural trauma. "Events are not inherently traumatic" (Alexander 8). History abounds with examples of extreme suffering that were not transformed into cultural traumas. One such case is that of the German people in WWII. They suffered the death, injury, and anguish of millions of soldiers, the death of civilians, the rape of women, and the destruction of cities and towns. However, such traumatic experiences did not automatically become a cultural trauma because it would have conflicted with the trauma construction in postwar Germany, which centered on the communal harm inflicted by the Germans on others (Heins and Langenohl 3).

What transfers a trauma from the sphere of individual suffering to the cultural level is a socially mediated process by means of which "collective actors 'decide' to represent social pain" (Alexander 10). The intentional creation of cultural traumas "occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their

memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (1). If the collective actors succeed in representing the trauma as ineradicable, "the memory does in fact take on the characteristics of indelibility and unshakeability" (Smelser 42). To achieve such a goal, the gap between event and representation should be bridged so that "a compelling framework of cultural classification", i.e. the telling of a new story, is undertaken (Alexander 12). The success of this act of storytelling involves the persuasion of a wider audience that they, too, have been traumatized by a particular experience or event (12).

One example of an effective metamorphosis of individual trauma into a collective, cultural trauma is that of African Americans. The gap between event and representation, which Alexander calls "the trauma process" or the process of "meaning making," was bridged by the efforts of the "carrier groups," those who a) have the ideal and material interests, b) are situated in particular places in the social structure, and c) have the discursive talents for articulating their claims in the public sphere (11). In the African American case, "the creation of trauma as a new master narrative" (12) has been undertaken by black intellectuals, activists, and artists since the late

decades of the nineteenth century (Eyerman, "Cultural" 61). The memory of slavery and its representation in speech and artworks grounded African American identity and permitted its institutionalization (61). The formation of this identity had taken different routes, which involved "openness to new forms of identification and the attempt to leave others behind" (Eyerman, *Slavery* 4). For instance, after the failure of the Reconstruction Era to integrate freed slaves and their offspring into American society as full American citizens, the ideas of returning to Africa or immigrating to the northern states and Canada were debated and seriously considered before eventually being dropped. Meanwhile, W. E. B. Du Bois's description of the "double consciousness," of being both African and American (4), was adopted.

Alexander states that for a new master narrative to succeed, the process of collective representation must provide answers to four questions: a) What is the nature of pain? What happened to the particular group and to the wider collectivity to which it belongs? b) What is the nature of the victim? What group of persons was affected by the traumatizing pain? c) What is the relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience? To what extent do the

members of the audience of the trauma representations experience an identification with the victimized group? d) Who is the perpetrator? (12-15)

From the slave narratives, dating back to the eighteenth century, to the writings of the twenty-first, African American "carrier groups" have been wrestling with these questions. The ongoing nature of the African American trauma process sheds light on the young experience of the Egyptian revolutionaries in terms of the time they need and the questions they have to address in order to create a new master narrative of their own cultural trauma.

It should be noted that the acts of the articulation of trauma, which have been taking place since 2011, have been produced under repressive conditions. The generations of Egyptian youth that led the 25th-January demonstrations against Hosni Mubarak's regime and were hailed for their creativity and courage by both Egyptian authorities and international voices are now "languishing behind bars" (Amnesty 2). The 2015 report by Amnesty International states that "today mass protests have given way to mass arrests, as 2011's 'Generation Protest' has become 2015's 'Generation Jail'" (2). The report

documents and condemns the Egyptian authorities' crackdown on political opposition and the sweeping arrests of youth from across the country's political spectrum (2). It is thus, in a sense, a battle of contested memories between the Egyptian regime and the revolutionaries. If the regime wins, it will ensure that the young generation will not challenge it in the future. But if the revolutionaries manage to transform their individual suffering into a cultural trauma, their new master narrative can well include and necessitate trials of perpetrators, demands for reparations, and control over the future.

To examine how Mustafa Ibrahim's poem "I Have Seen Today" lays the foundations for a cultural trauma, this paper starts with a reading of Terrance Hayes's "American Sonnets for my Past and Future Assassin." Standing upon the solid grounds of the African American cultural trauma, how does the poem respond to the presidency of Donald Trump?

Sustaining a Master Narrative

Trump's presidency has stirred up a storm of worry, anger, shock as well as calls for resistance in American artistic and intellectual circles. Around the time of his inauguration, "[p]rotesting artists [...] proposed everything from boycotts to museum clo-

tures to public statements" (Wilkinson). Literary readings were held. Newspapers' culture pages and literary websites published artists' reflections on the meaning of resistance at that particular time (Wilkinson). *The Huffington Post* posed the question of "What it Means to be an Artist in the Time of Trump." It called upon artists "as activists, optimists, truth-tellers and revolutionaries, to resist the normalization of hate and prejudice [and] to stand up for the communities that have been marginalized" (Priscilla and Brooks). The responses of the artists interviewed, of many ethnicities and genders, pooled down in one big river, namely: resisting white supremacy, alerting the community to the experience of marginalization, countering the darkness that rose to the surface with Trump, and resisting xenophobia, sexism, and racism.

African Americans are among the many groups threatened by Trump's aggressive and racist policies and rhetoric. However, the uniqueness of this group is derived from a long history of oppression that resulted in the formation of a distinctive collective identity. Eyerman stresses the importance of noting that "the notion of 'African American' is not itself a natural category, but rather a historically formed collective identity that first of all required

articulation then acceptance on the part of those it was meant to incorporate" ("Cultural" 76). Written in response to Trump's presidency (Sealey), "American Sonnets" represents this collective identity and contributes to the articulation of the experience of African Americans in the here and now. Since oppression is still a reality, the poem addresses the same questions for which the trauma process of African Americans had to provide answers since its inception, namely: the nature of pain, the nature of the victim, the relationship of the victim to a wider audience, and the attribution of responsibility (Alexander 13-15).

Sonnet One situates the reader vis-à-vis the nature of pain and the identity of the victim. It establishes the vulnerability of the self in long, Whitmanesque lines (run-on lines characterized by catalogues in the tradition of Walt Whitman), which list existential threats such as cancer, disease, and "the grim reaper herself" side by side with dangers specific to the African American condition: bullets, bullwhips (reminiscent of the time of slavery), and Archie Bunker, the *All In The Family* 1970s TV character who exercised his bigotry against the African Americans, amongst others. All of this and more "kill me," the poetic persona declares (Hayes). Sonnet Two registers the

persona's smooth movement from the collective to the personal to the collective once again. The vulnerable collective self reveals another aspect, a liveliness shown in "Our uproarious breathing and ruckus. Our eruptions/our disregard for dust" (Hayes). The image of dust eventually leads to the "last hoorah" of the persona's sister and the horror of beholding her head on the pillow. The refrain "For a long time the numbers were balanced. The number alive equal to the number in graves" underlines the pain deeply rooted in the collective memory. It foregrounds the "we," which is essential to the act of representation, since it is this collectivity that faces danger and endures suffering (Alexander and Breese xiii).

Cataloguing the names of assassins invokes the collective memory, which orients and unifies the group "through time and over space" (Eyerman, "The Past" 161):

I pour a pinch of serious poison for you
James
Earl Ray Dylann Roof I pour a punch of
piss for you
George Zimmerman John Wilkes
Booth Robert
Chambliss Thomas Edwin Blanton Jr
Bobby Frank
Cherry Herman Frank Cash Jim Crow

your name
Is a gate opening upon another gate
[...] (Hayes)

The absence of punctuation marks denies the perpetrators individuality. They are all one: those who assassinated King and Lincoln, the white terrorists who bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church in 1963, and the Jim Crow laws that enforced racial segregation in the southern states after the Reconstruction Era. It also collapses the temporal element. These scars of old wounds belong to the present because they have become part of the live identity of a people. Furthermore, the trauma is relived with each new trigger.

The affect of anger is foregrounded in the above lines. The successive plosive alliterations of the b's and p's load the persona's language with an anger embedded in the collective memory. Smelser states that "experiencing the language of negative affect is a necessary condition for believing that a cultural trauma exists or is threatening" (41). Such affect creates connections between the African American trauma and the wider audience capable of empathy with a particular group's ordeals. The anger builds up towards the following lines:

Love trumps power or blood to trump
power
Beauty trumps power or blood to
trump power
Justice trumps power or blood to
trump power (Hayes)

The play on the word "trump" shifts from an affirmation of noble values to a threat of blood beating power off. Pain breeds anger and the anger here is transformed into challenge, as the persona reminds those in power that it is either that love, beauty, and justice win or else blood will "trump power." In speaking of the higher values, the poem establishes a relation to the wider audience. Alexander states that at the beginning of a trauma process, most audience members see little or no relation between them and the victimized group. "Only if the victims are represented in terms of valued qualities shared by the larger collective identity will the audience be able to symbolically participate in the experience of the originating trauma" (14). Far from it being "at the beginning," the African American master narrative still needs to address the wider audience.

The tone of challenge in Sonnet Four is directed against the perpetrator, the assassin of the earth of "my nigga eyes," the deep well of "my nigga throat," the

tender balls of “my nigga testicles,” “my tongue” (Hayes). The anonymous addressee is not a person. It is the white culture that the persona challenges: “Still I speak for the dead. You cannot assassinate my ghosts” (Hayes). Here, Hayes builds on an already existing figuration of trauma in the ghost. In his analysis of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* as a text which helped establish some of the basic narrative conventions of trauma fiction, Luckhurst pinpoints the centrality of the ghost. It “embodied the idea of the persistence of traumatic memory, the anachronic intrusion of the past into the present” (93). Ghosts carry the history of untold violence, the stories of the “sixty million and more” to whom *Beloved* is dedicated. Hayes’s ghosts come from the same collective narrative and share the same twofold function: tracing the stories of the unnamed, and speaking for an entire community (94).

Drawing from the reservoir of collective memory, foregrounding the “we” who face the danger, feel the anger, and dare the perpetrator, “American Sonnets” still addresses the fundamental questions African Americans have been engaging with since the end of the Reconstruction Era in 1877. Even successful master narratives of cultural trauma need constant bol-

stering, especially when justice is not actualized.

Inscribing a New Narrative

Examining the case of the Egyptian revolutionaries through the lens of the African American trauma process yields some basic insights. First, it reveals the lack of temporal distance. Seven years is too short a time to frame a narrative. The African American master narrative went through many different phases, each posing its perils as well as the creative means to overcome them. In this light, the oppressive conditions under which Egypt’s revolutionaries have been operating since 2011 represent only one phase in a longer journey towards justice. Furthermore, a reading of the cultural trauma of African Americans underlines the need for the accumulation of a literature capable of convincing the wider audience that they, too, have been traumatized. To this end, a massive aesthetic body has been produced since 2011. The act of representation is evident in poetry and fictional works, theater and storytelling performances, and movies and visual documentation of the state’s atrocities. There is a revolutionary narrative awaiting a change of conditions in order to gain prominence in the public sphere. Mustafa Ibrahim’s “I Have Seen Today” intimately belongs to

this creative output. The poem, published in Arabic in a poetry collection entitled *The Manifesto*, excerpts of which are translated in this paper, was written by someone who was an active participant in the 2011 uprising. He states how, like his fellow revolutionaries, he was chased and tear-gassed by the state police and how he witnessed the killing of protestors, some of whom he only got to know after their murder, as in the case of Mohamed Mostafa, whose death is depicted in “I Have Seen Today” (Ibrahim).

When juxtaposed to Hayes’s “American Sonnets,” “I Have Seen Today” reveals a striking similarity in the way it grapples with the questions for which a new master narrative of trauma needs to provide answers. The poem takes off from a similar point to Hayes’s text. In the quartet epilogue, Ibrahim identifies the victim:

If you say we are small bunch, we’ll tell
you we’ll even get smaller
We are sifting dirt in order to offer it up
to you
People leave us in the sun to stay in the
shade
And al-Hossein, our master, has never
cared for number. (Ibrahim 120)

The victim is the smaller group that held its ground and persisted when abandoned by the many. As in the case of “American Sonnets,” the “we” that faces danger and endures suffering is constructed (Alexander and Breese xiii). This “we” is a prerequisite to the framing of a narrative since “[s]uffering collectivities... do not exist simply as material networks. They must be imagined into being” (xii). In a poem entitled “The Prophets are Many,” Ibrahim describes this collectivity as “a generation who parents itself in a fake time/ their clothes smell of vinegar and yeast/ not good at dictation, they are writing the *sira* (history of prophethood)” (55). When asked what he meant by “a generation who parents itself,” Ibrahim talked about his generation that grew up in the cultural void of the Mubarak era and neither received guidance nor were provided with good enough role models by their elders. In her analysis of the radical change effected by younger generations in the definition of the intellectual in post-revolutionary Egypt, Abulelnaga states that they “did not emerge from the womb of the cultural or political institution” (70). Discarding the discourse of the older intellectuals, many of whom have been tamed by the cultural institutions, the new intellectuals expressed their opinions in both art and activism and

offered “alternative choices and new approaches” (71).

Unlike Hayes, who builds on an existing cultural trauma, Ibrahim is aware of the lack of a collective memory specifically for the revolutionaries to use as a frame of reference. Hence, he chooses to connect to a culturally significant narrative of revolt against tyrannical political figures, martyrdom, infanticide, and the rise of good in the face of evil. Ibrahim resorts to a trauma etched on the collective Arabo-Islamic memory, that of the betrayal and martyrdom of al-Hossein (Prophet Muhammad’s grandson), in order to resonate with the wider audience the poem intends to address.

The murdered young revolutionary in 2011 is likened to al-Hossein, who was killed while thirsty in the desert of Iraq in 680 CE. Encouraged by a large crowd of supporters to go to Kufa (Iraq) to oust Yazid bin Mu‘awiya, the corrupt Umayyad ruler (r. 680-683 A.D.), and claim his rightful place as the Muslim caliph, al-Hossein was betrayed by the very people who pledged allegiance to him. His murder at the hands of Yazid has established the Battle of Karbala as a definitive historical trauma in Shiism (Dabashi). Eventually, it broke free from the religious frame to

become a cultural narrative of revolution (75).

Loss and defeat bind the stories of al-Hossein and Egypt’s revolutionaries. However, in the collective memory, the tragedy of Karbala was transformed into triumph. Defeated and killed, al-Hossein was resurrected into an eternal rebel whose story captures the paradox of moral victory and political failure (Dabashi 83). This transformation of tragedy into triumph, which is one of the common processes of cultural traumas, is a strategy for overcoming loss (Eyerman, “The Past” 161). This is why the allegory of al-Hossein not only provides a cultural link between the present moment and the collective memory, but also yields a way for making sense out of the revolutionaries’ suffering.

The poem starts off with the scene of the historical trauma, the killing of al-Hossein. It then oscillates between the allegory and the present moment. The cinematic techniques of montage, zoom in, and fading out eventually collapse the temporal element, converging the two stories in one. As the poem progresses, the past becomes the present not only through the employment of motifs from the allegory—the chase, the abandonment, and the thirst—but also because during the escape

of the revolutionaries we no longer see Cairo. It is Kufa that is the setting of the traumatic scene. It is Yazid who stands on the balcony surrounded by his soldiers. Pointing “his sword” towards the revolutionaries (Ibrahim 123), they disperse:

I don't know who of us was crucified,
 who was beaten,
 Who hid in the minaret, who was thrown
 from above it
 Or even who got lost and was killed by
 thirst.
 All streets a trap, all houses a trap.
 Kufa is asleep even before night time.
 She put her fingers in her ears and left
 us outside her door
 To die. (123)

While anachrony (disruption of narrative time) is not rare or modern, Luckhurst states how a late body of visual and written stories involving trauma has played around with narrative time (80). Anachrony in the poem allows a re-enactment of the cycle of revolt; hence, when the time, place, and name of the murdered revolutionary are specified, the present is lodged in the older narrative:

The sound of protest chanting,
 interrupted by the sirens of ambulance.
 [...]

the camera zooms in on the khaki clothes,
 two rows of army soldiers, lined horizontally,
 suddenly appear,
 The tiles of the pavement are taken out,
 broken,
 The storyteller begins in a shaken voice:
 I hold Mohamed Mostafa on the ground.
 I cry as I turn him from his shoulder to his back,
 we quickly carry him, I hold him from his armpits,
 my fingers feeling his heart
 with every beat fading out,
 his blood not dripping,
 it was pouring,
 the doctors later said
 What was cut is an important artery. (Ibrahim 134-135)

Since dealing with the nature of pain is essential for the trauma process, “American Sonnets” reiterates the refrain, which reminds the wider audience that “The number alive [are] equal to the number in graves.” Ibrahim, on the other hand, traces the nature of pain through reliance on the senses: the sounds of chanting and the sirens, feeling the heartbeats dying down, and the color of blood. The sense of urgency and horror, embodied in the fast

linguistic pace, is ironically juxtaposed with what happens hours after the killing:

The Camera shows a young man soaking his hands in blood,
 In tears, his friend passes by,
 He is saying something, repeating it, as if memorizing:
 Bid your friends in the night battle
 goodbye
 and in the morning show their blood to the passersby,
 to the buses carrying people to their work. (137)

Similar to how “American Sonnets” names the perpetrator as some entity bigger than Trump (white culture), the perpetrator in 2011 is not only the tyrannical political leader. Just like how the Shiite community was implicated in al-Hossein's killing by abandoning him, the masses who rose against Mubarak and then walked out on the revolutionaries are implicated as well. Angry at them, the persona warns al-Hossein to “go back/ Those for whom you want to struggle and sacrifice/ Are contented slaves/ And in the last scene you will die alone” (Ibrahim 133). The Language of negative affect, a necessary condition for the audience to believe that a cultural trauma exists (Smelser 41), is evident in Ibrahim's poem as it was in Hayes's. But

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while "American Sonnets" addresses the perpetrator with the angry voice of the group, the primary concern of Ibrahim is to persuade an audience who does not realize yet that the revolutionaries' trauma could be theirs as well.

The act of witnessing, present in the title, in the way the poem is narrated as a testimony of what happened, is hammered upon in the final lines of the poem. In a twofold move, the repetition of "I have seen today" is a preservation of the revolutionaries' memory and an invocation of the rebellion of al-Hossein. The challenge is embedded in the promise that as long as tyranny exists, so will revolt. This is the Karbala legacy:

I have seen today the picture at a distance

I have said today al-Hossein is to be killed many times

I have seen today as in a revolutionary dream:

soldiers crowded over al-Hossein's corpse

beating him with sticks every time he tries to rise up.

[...]

I have seen today blood on army belts

I have known today that al-Hossein is us

Every time he gets killed, he lives. (Ibrahim 138)

To conclude, since cultural traumas involve an intentional act of creation, master narratives in the making could benefit from knowledge of the trauma process. Reading Mustafa Ibrahim's poem through the lens of the African American cultural trauma offers insights into the triumphs of Egyptian revolutionaries as well as the challenges awaiting them in the creation of their own cultural trauma. By laying claim to a wound and a defeat which were not the revolutionaries' alone and by etching their suffering onto the Egyptian collective memory, "I Have Seen Today" attempts to reconstruct the collective identity. It is through writing the past that the collectivity seeking "bread, freedom and social justice" could re-direct the course of political action. The challenge however, is that the creation of a cultural trauma is a long and arduous endeavor of many individuals who manage to imagine a collectivity into being and frame a story that persuades the wider audience that they, too, have been traumatized—an immense feat indeed.

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