

A la recherche du genre | International Conference of the Swiss Graduate Programme in Gender Studies
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Session 5 | Thursday, 19 June 2008 | 9.30-12.30 | Room M 5220 | English

In the Aftermath of War and Disaster: Coping with Violence and Bereavement

Chair: Veena Das (Baltimore)

Participants: Katharina Thurnheer, Andrea Grieder, Anja Sieber

This workshop explores social ways of dealing with massive violence, disaster, and bereavement in three different socio-political contexts: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Eastern Sri Lanka, and Rwanda.

By focussing on narratives of violence and daily life practices the workshop takes a close look at the different ways through which people memorise and engage with the painful events. Thereby, the relevance of social relationships emerge central stage in both shaping possible ways of coping and becoming transformed in the course of negotiations. The papers address questions of subjectivity and inter-relatedness and interrogate the notion of the everyday after massive disruptions as well as the meaning of reconciliation in a context of spatial vicinity of victims and perpetrators.

Motivated by the theoretical reflections on violence, social suffering, and the eventfulness of the "ordinary" provided by Prof. Veena Das in her publications, the workshop aims at gaining a better understanding of possible forms of conceptualising terms such as coping, witnessing, reconciliation, and normalcy.

We are pleased to discuss these questions directly with Prof. Veena Das in her role of invited expert to the workshop.

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Katharina Thurnheer

Caring for Life: After the Tsunami in Eastern Sri Lanka

The December 2004 tsunami had swept away whole villages and caused the death of thousands of people. In its aftermath, the survivors had to reorganize their living. Many parents who had lost one or more children in the tsunami found solace in the birth of another child within one to two years. In my presentation, I would like to discuss the ways in which these newborns offered specific forms of remembering the dead, and thus helped women and men to cope with the tremendous losses caused by the disaster. However, such forms of coping were not possible to everyone, and in themselves not free of ambiguities. Other social processes, too, need to be considered that could play decisive roles in the personal ways of coming to terms with the past, and with the present.

The paper draws on ethnographic fieldwork in post-tsunami, war-affected eastern Sri Lanka, primarily during 2005 to 2006.

Andrea Grieder

Painful Tears: Dealing with Pain in Rwanda

My argument on Painful Tears takes Veena Das's reflexions on/in *The Act of Witnessing* as a starting point to analyse the commemoration ceremony in Nyamagumba, Rwanda in 2007. The aim of the paper is to discuss how pain is articulated during this commemoration and remembering ceremony. To do this, I first discuss the way, violence and pain is represented in the discourses of political authorities. Secondly, I try to identify the underlying figure of witnessing in the "*témoignage*" of Marthe, a woman who has survived the genocide of the Tutsis in 1994. According to Das's understanding of witnessing as the speaking of the death of relationships, I argue that Marthe's speaking of her experience of genocide violence during commemoration activities can be read as a mourning for the loss of confidence in social relationships and her own being-in-the-world. Between the figure of Antigone, that emphasizes the emergence of (the female) voice in a zone of two deaths and the creation of the subject through engagement with poisonous knowledge in everyday relationships in Das's Figure Asha, I see in Marthe a figure in which the being is (re-)constructed around the fences of her own fragility.

Anja Sieber

Memories of War – War of Memories in Bosnia

As the workshop explores social ways of coping with massive violence and bereavement, this paper discusses the dealing with the past in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina and the meaning of reconciliation in a context of spatial proximity of victims and perpetrators.

By focussing on women's narratives in Prijedor – a region where high rates of violence, you may even say genocide took place – I take the opportunity to examine two contrasting ways of memorising and coping with wartime, the suffered loss and the violence experienced: on the one hand I will focus on women who remained in Prijedor during wartime and who today prefer to keep silent about the past. These women see as the main task of the rebuilding process the easing of the economic situation. Otherwise I will concentrate on returnee women and their engagement for addressing the past events in public and their fight for an acknowledgement of what happened to them and to their relatives. Their wish, that this acknowledgement happens on different levels – on the public political level, on the juridical level and last but not least on the interpersonal local level, in the neighbourhood –, shall be discussed in detail.

All in all, the very distinct attitudes towards processes of remembering the past polarize the society in Prijedor.

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Short biography of all participants

Chair/Expert: **Prof. Dr. Veena Das**, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore MD (USA)

Katharina Thurnheer, Social Anthropology, PhD candidate

Gender Graduate School, University of Bern / Fribourg

Research Project: Life Beyond Survival: Social Forms of Coping in Post-Tsunami, War-Affected Batticaloa, Sri Lanka

Research Interests: Coping; Disaster; War; Gender; Ethnography; Sri Lanka;

Andrea Grieder, Ethnology, Sociology, PhD candidate

Gender Graduate School, University of Zurich & Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris

Research Project: Voices of pain: Memories and Subjectivities in Rwanda

Research Interests: Violence; Memory; Trauma; Subjectivity; Rituals, Gender; Rwanda

Anja Sieber, Social Anthropologist, PhD candidate

Gender Graduate School, University of Bern / Fribourg

Research Project: The War of Memories: Dealing with the Past in the Aftermath of the Bosnian War

Research Interests: Coping; Memory; Post-War; Gender; Ethnicity; Bosnia-Herzegovina;