

Researching to Transgress & Transform

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Introduction

In the face of historical trauma, how can critical consciousness develop? Can radical researcher empathy, its experience and expression, play a transformative role in research encounters? These questions guide reflections on dialogues with residents of Tivoli Gardens, an inner city community in Kingston, Jamaica in which 76 people were killed by the state in May 2010. Three researchers are collaborating to witness survivors' stories of trauma in order to create a public art installation to memorialize loved ones lost and break historical silences thereby catalyzing conscientization (the process through which social and political realities become understood through critical consciousness, Freire, 1970). Taylor's (1997) concept of percepticide - as the annihilation of the perception and understanding of atrocities - is proposed to account for ways in which participants, and others, simultaneously know but do not acknowledge the meaning of the violence. Freire's (1987) idea of liberatory education - as a praxis that critically challenges psychic colonization (Oliver, 2004) - is extended to research practices with emancipatory aims.

This chapter also explores the psychological conditions under which people living in death saturated environments begin to perceive the social structures that permit mass murder. It proposes a form of inquiry that transgresses social science research norms by accompanying research participants as they critically analyze the world in which they live. Transgression emerges in the presence of a form of witnessing elaborated upon by

Oliver (2001). Based on participant insights it becomes possible to imagine researchers of collective trauma as agents of transformative, liberative and healing praxes.

Researching Collective Trauma

On May 24, 2010 the government of Jamaica issued a state of emergency and sent security forces into Tivoli Gardens, an inner city community in Kingston. The police and army surrounded the community attacking residents for four days. Officially, the death toll stands at 76 people, the largest number of civilians killed by the state in a single operation since a post-slavery rebellion in 1865.

What precipitated the incursion into the community was a request, in 2009, by the US government to extradite a known drug lord, Christopher ‘Dudus’ Coke. Coke was wanted in the US on drug and arms trafficking charges. In Tivoli Gardens he was esteemed as a leader, a ‘don,’ ‘The President,’ head of a notorious international drug trafficking organization called the Shower Posse.

Tivoli Gardens is a politically polarized community in Kingston. Such areas are known as ‘garrison’ communities as they are closed to opposing political views, delivering votes en bloc (or near 100%) to the political party which governs the area and from whom residents receive financial benefits. They are autonomous zones - self-armed, with a justice system independent of the state. Garrisons are plagued with chronic poverty, high unemployment and violence and are also sites of resilience and resourcefulness. In Tivoli, some people enjoy homeownership yet many are unable to regularly meet basic needs such as food, electricity, and medicine, as well as books and transportation for their children to go to school without the patronage of the area don and/or the Member of Parliament.

In 2012, in response to signs of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, the Ministry of Education opened a hotline for school-aged children of Tivoli but the hotline was flooded by calls from adults. On hearing this, I conceptualized a Truth and Memory project as part of a process that could witness people's experiences, acknowledge human rights abuses and contribute to public understandings of state violence.

In 2013, I began to collaborate with Deborah Thomas, professor of anthropology at University of Pennsylvania, and Junior 'Gabu' Wedderburn, an artist/activist. Together, Deborah, Gabu and I are working to create *Tivoli Stories*, a multi-media art installation, as a platform for members of the Tivoli community to remember those killed and contribute to a healing process in which historical silences are broken while supporting efforts of human rights activists working on issues of state crime.

Jamaica is a (post)colonial¹ nation that gained political independence from Britain in 1962. It has one of the highest per capita murder rates (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2013) and one of the highest per capita lethal police shooting rates in the world (Jamaicans for Justice & the International Human Rights Clinic of The George Washington University Law School, 2008) yet there is little public outrage.

The conditions that set the stage for this apathy are rooted in the colonial experience and described in a report by the Department of Sociology and Social Work, UWI (2001) in their analysis of the post independence period when self-rule began. When a centralist styled government developed in response to underdevelopment. When the state, mirroring the plantation society model, commandeered public life. When

¹ The term (post)colonial is used to problematize the experience that for poor black Jamaicans the sociopolitical conditions are not posterior to the colonial order.

demands for social and economic transformation went unmet. When independent civil society was displaced by political patronage. When crime began its upward spiral.

The era of the late 1970s and early 1980s is described as a period of 'war' in which political party allegiance motivated murderous confrontations over scarce benefits in some poor, urban communities (Department of Sociology and Social Work, UWI, 2001). Politicians issued guns to party supporters living in garrison communities. Law enforcement agents deployed aggressive power and repressive strategies against the black, urban poor.

Political sociologist, Anthony Harriott (2003), argues that the rapid growth in the murder rate in Jamaica has arisen from disputes between gang members in the expanding informal sector of the country. He explains that in response to law enforcement that does not protect people living in marginalized communities, violent self-help acts are the group's survival strategy.

Against this backdrop Deborah, Gabu and I asked survivors to share their experience of what took place in Tivoli Gardens during those four days in May 2010. What foregrounds, expectedly, participant's narratives are recollections of what they endured prior to, during and in the aftermath of the invasion.

The dullness that hovered over the community on Monday, May 24th, a day after sporadic gunfire could be heard in and beyond the blocked neighborhood.

The view of a helicopter swung level with second story town homes driving residents indoors.

The herding of families and neighbours into houses considered safe.

The calling out to God, the unbroken prayer.

The inability to eat, to shower, to sleep.

The lack of TV and radio.

The lack of contact with the outside world as cellular batteries drained and could not be recharged since electricity was cut off to the community.

The fear, the ceaseless fear, that at any moment the militia could, and did, enter homes removing men and boys to their death.

The onset of an asthma attack. The escort to the Kingston Public Hospital in an ambulance with masked soldiers.

The premature birth and death of a baby.

The wheelbarrow transporting an alive shrapneled body to the public hospital.

The execution of two sons by the militia as they kneeled on the curb in front of their neighbor's house, hands behind their heads.

The witnessing of their murder by their mother as the youngest son cried, "Mummy, Mummy, Mummy, Mummy, Mummy.....Mummy, Mummy, Mummy, Mummy, save me, save mi no Mummy?"

The sight of dead bodies piled into open back trucks.

The smell of burnt, burning bodies.

In addition to these accounts of brutality and psychological torture, I was also listening for sites of resistance, because it is from neighbouring downtown communities that conscious reggae music emerged as a sociologically indigenous form of historical-cultural analysis. I was listening for a voice of opposition, not expecting the silences I heard alienating people from their knowledge that the trauma they describe is an acute manifestation of traumatization - a process by which everyday structures in the social

world oversee suffering, deprivation, humiliation, physical endangerment and scarcity (Maurice Stevens, forthcoming).

What I heard, in almost all narratives, is evidence of what Diana Taylor (1997) identifies as the psychological accompaniment to Argentina's genocide in its 'Dirty War' when 30,000 people disappeared without much initial outcry. Taylor describes the destruction of the perception, understanding and meaning of atrocities as percepticide. The way people simultaneously see and overlook what they see when amplified tyranny destabilizes the self. When mass violence overwhelms victims and spectators destroying their sense of reality. Under these conditions fear rises and individuals regress in a defensive manner. Understanding of events is then pushed further away. Empathy recedes making room for what she sees as, "a new, silent population" (p.132).

Kelly Oliver's (2004) idea of psychic colonization also helps us understand how subjectivities are emptied. Racism, Oliver shows, invades the psychic space of the black supplanting the sense of self with humiliating images of inferiority. Once alienated from the self, subjectivity, or a sense of oneself as agent, is lost. Estranged from their affects the ability to derive meaning from events is compromised.

In *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* Oliver (2001) proposes an ethical response to oppression and trauma. Arguing that mere recognition from the other is not an adequate response, she develops the idea of witnessing, summarized as subjective address and response, as reclamation of relationships historied by psychic colonization. Oliver extends witnessing beyond sight to also include touch (in its affective sense) because witnessing is not only about restoring the visibility of the other. It is not satisfied with exposing trauma. It is fundamentally concerned with invisibles that bind us, elements that

exceed cognition. Bearing witness is a way of being in relationship through which understanding increases because what is shared intersubjectively, in addition to language, are visceral and imaginal experiences. In this mode of being what arises, as subjects engage in dialogue about traumatization, is a gestalt of oppression expanding verbal articulation. In the imagination via a form of memory Watkins & Shulman (2008) refer to as the kinesthetic imagination, invisible structures of oppression inclusive of their dynamics are raised to consciousness becoming available for working through.

Being Forsaken

But this form of witnessing is not always offered to marginalized people in research encounters. Tuhiwai Smith (2012) demonstrates the need for decolonizing methodologies to address ongoing colonial encounters produced by academic imperialism. In an effort to participate in research capable of transgressing practices that overlook traumatization I attempted to fully witness a member of the Tivoli community as he critically examined the social forces that foreclose on people's lives. What follows is an excerpt from the interview:

Deanne: You said the people in Tivoli are still traumatized?

Shawn: *Yes.*

Deanne: What do you think could be done to help them?

Shawn: *Bwoy, [boy] that's a whole heap of thinking, because people dem [them] being traumatized and yet still soldier and police around them. Enforcing and doing what dem doing. Some a dem even acting out of the law. You understand what me a say? So I don't know what kind of counselling, or what kind a ting [thing] they're gonna do right now to get back to the people dem. You understand what me a say, because with the*

traumatization wh eh gwaan, [that's occurring] plus the soldier and the police still molesting the people dem, and dealing with the people in such a bad way, I don't know how anyone get over that or what gonna come out fi dem [for them to] stop think about that. You understand what me a say? Is an everyday situation, is not like just today, is an everyday situation wh eh [that] the people dem haffi face. You understand wha me a say [what I'm saying]?

Deanne: So they're being retraumatized?

Shawn: *Same way. Same way. Because when you done used to a ting you know, and something happen to you, you know, and then you just know say bwoy, it just continue, continue, continue, bugging you, bugging you, bugging you, wh eh [what are] you gonna tink?*

How you gonna pray?

Tell me now.

Twenty-one months after this conversation I returned to Kingston in order to explore, with Shawn, how his critical consciousness, (evidenced in his analysis of the repeated retraumatization of the community), had so quickly turned to despair. I asked him what he meant by the question, "how you gonna pray?" as this seemed to be a rhetorical expression of hopelessness. He explained:

You can't think about God at the same time that you're thinking about your tribulations. Father God forsake you.

To be forsaken is to be abandoned.

As we spoke it became clear that the sense of being rejected and cast off extended to interpersonal relationships as well. For four days Tivoli resident's lives were

dominated by the presence of violence and the absence of its end. During this period victims lacked personal and social power. During, and since the state of emergency, unbidden images and memories of sounds and smells of varieties of death inhabit community members' psychic life hijacking their emotional experience, flooding their affect, obliterating (in those moments) their ability to think about anything but the devastation they feel. These symptoms cohere rendering trauma survivors voiceless and hopeless.

Until they are transformed, the full effects of traumatic memories remain detached in intrapsychic space. In reflecting on the necessity to bear witness to the Holocaust, Shoshana Felman (1992) calls for a dialogue between the inside and the outside of atrocity, between trauma survivors and witnesses, because, "From within, the inside is unintelligible, it is not present to itself" (p. 231). What Shawn and other community members suffering from the shock of trauma need in order to metabolize traumatic experience is a social space in which to articulate their experiences through which they become aware, affectively and cognitively, that the witness perceives their experiences. Because witnessing the inside of the horrors of trauma can validate the suffering, releasing and healing it.

Without such a communal space marked by caring curiosity and the sense that the witness crosses into the survivor's perceptual world, psychic interiority as the somatic scene of post traumatic experiences perseverates suffering, torturing the victim, fragmenting the self, breaking people up inside, incapacitating their ability to think critically.

In this follow up discussion I also asked Shawn how he had transgressed the normative tradition of silence in our initial conversation. He recalled that in the aftermath of the state of emergency journalists, human rights activists, counselors/psychotherapists and the international commission of inquiry (occurring at the time of this writing) asked residents about the objective events of the massacre. But Shawn could not remember anyone displaying interest in his subjectivity. No one expressed curiosity about his understanding of political power, state violence or their effects on people's daily lives. While some mental health workers offered interventions to help treat PTSD symptoms Shawn did not know of anyone being asked about their understanding of the roots and structures of the chronic trauma that plagues the community.

Throughout our dialogue, Shawn articulated community member's desire to be heard and their reality that they have no one to address.

We don't have people to talk to like how you come now we can talk to you now. Dat [that] is the problem. Dem [they] don't have anybody to talk to. Who dem a go talk dem cry to? [Who can people cry to?] If you no come now and say bwoy [boy] 'How di [do] people dem feel? I want to talk to di people dem.' People no come [people don't come] and talk and say 'I want to talk to di people dem.' ...People woulda speak up more. Mi [I] can tell you dat and I can bet mi [my] life on dat. Because dem want to talk you know.

Who I gonna talk to? Who's gonna listen?

The reason that people don't talk about how they feel is maybe they don't have a person like you now to express...like how you'd a go in the details [your going into detail] and put down, jot down certain questions to dem inna [in a] certain way.

You can't get to express yourself....maybe nervousness and pointless...

No body come to really say bwoy, 'I hear you' or 'I hear your cries and if you feel like you want to speak out, you speak out and say what's on your mind....Nobody no care.

Its just like you now come an give us a lickle [little] hope now, a piece a hope now we can express ourselves freely and know say bwoy [boy] you no haffi look behind you and who a talk, who a listen...You can just talk openly...

What community members lack are displays of interest in their perceptual world. Relationships with others who they believe will care enough to hear the meaning of their speech. Despite an interest in verifying and documenting the events that occurred during the state of emergency victims had yet to be invited to testify to the circumstances out of which their traumatic stress had emerged, conditions that trapped psychosocial pathology in their bodies, hidden away from articulative expression.

What Shawn and other community members responded to in some of the dialogues we have had was an intersubjective experience marked by care. Then a voice, capable of speaking to the psychic pain, can come forward. In the presence of interpersonal warmth, they understand that their story is wanted, their voice belongs.

Liberatory Modes of Research: Empathic Inquiry

In *Learning to Question: A Pedagogy of Liberation* Freire (1989) affirms that, “What is needed is a historic-cultural psychoanalysis.” (p. 92). I believe that transgressive and transformative research practices that witness research participant’s experiences and knowledge via relational humanism can invoke the sociopolitical inclusion Martín-Baró (1996) saw as necessary in order to reformulate society. In situations of historical trauma,

creating vulnerable, dialogic spaces where people can move between their personal anguish and the sociohistoric determinants that shape their lives are an ethical responsibility of researchers committed to transformative participatory action research.

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