Technologies of Trauma

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Technologies of Trauma: Cultural Formations Over Time

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To Fuzz and Nabs – Remember that standing up is part of 'unwounding'. So do.

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Foreword

Where Goes the Afterlife of Trauma?

In 2019, a toddler, Sujith Wilson stuck in a borehole in Tamil Nadu, South India, became the object of media spectacle. The tiny body of the two-year-old toddler wedged inside the borehole possessed public imaginary for days. Trapped inside an abandoned 180m deep well, Sujith was consumed through his unfortunate entrapment as a mediated event unfolding through media gaze in real time. The incident ended when his decomposed and dismembered body was retrieved through a 'special equipment' (BBC, 2019) after five days. The eventual retrieval of his body and the rescue operations were reported in intimate detail over media with every new information shared widely to a hungry public on social media. The tragic event orchestrated a media theatre of curiosity and in the process it ignited debates over an array of social and environmental issues such as the dangers uncovered borewells posed to the public to the government's lack of governance, the need to invent special equipment to rescue people trapped in boreholes including the kinds of hydraulic drilling machines that would be required to extract the trapped toddler. These incessant flows of discussions and accounts produced a mill of content that kept the tragic event in circulation and in public consciousness. These articulations in the public sphere conjoined media narratives with user-generated content online, fusing the traumatic predicament of the toddler wrangling with death with the agitated discourses on how best to save the young life. His heart-breaking plight igniting mass prayers from the public from different religions sutured this mediated trauma with sacred rituals of salvation and public expressions of pity. Trauma as adjoined to rituals of redemption and its repetition as a socio-cultural format assigns technologies as implicated in the production of a social order and sensemaking as evidenced through the sacred rituals coalescing with the profane imminence of death as a possibility that would cut short the young life. Trauma as indoctrinated through the ordering and dis-ordering orientations of technologies is secured through this spectacular economy in which the minutiae of the suffering child is conveyed through non-stop tweets and the re-telling of the tragic event through multi-media formats. The tragic predicament of Sujith as dually entrapped inside the borehole and within the media machinery produces an invocation to understand the construction of this trauma aesthetic and its 'afterlife' within a moral economy in which technologies re-pathologize trauma through an interplay with human curiosity and affectivity but most importantly in its ability to reproduce social relations through the spectacular afforded through its technicity. Sujith's parents who are poor farmers became backdrops in which a whole public imaginary of the best clever

techniques to rescue the toddler re-modulated trauma as owned and co-produced by technologies with a connectivity and consciousness to the event, and an insatiable public enmeshed in the accounting of the trapped life. Sujith Wilson's trauma and premature death remain as trauma's afterlife in the digital sphere co-located with information on boreholes as death traps and the boreholes as a symbol of water scarcity and the visceral politics of water in India (Sirur, 2019). Sujith's trauma is drowned out through the landscape of 27 million borewells in India, with many abandoned as they no longer supply water.

The interface of technologies with trauma produces an afterlife enlarging it within a public sphere of distribution and equally through the capacities of technologies to re-work trauma and to re-distribute affect as part of its story-telling modes. The reworking, re-making and the enlargement of trauma through the technicity of technologies is the emphasis of this book, moving into its uncertainty in the digital age when the subjects of pathos and trauma are resur-rected and transacted through the user-generated economy such that images and narratives are recombined with disruptive creativity of consuming audiences. Moving from oral societies to literate communities which archive, record and replicate stories and narratives, our bind with the technological is an ongoing trope effacing the distinctions between the public and private, and between the primal and intimate. Beyond second-hand witnessing and testimonials through technological forms, the co-relationship between trauma and technologies enacts trauma as residing within the everyday as narratives, stories and events which draw us to feel with others, for others or to withhold or perhaps even suspend our affectivity in view of trauma as a resonant genre saturating our newsfeeds with its banality. Through time trauma as re-populated through technologies which abstract it consigns trauma as both disembodied and extracted from the psy-chological, affective and experiential to be transferred onto the bowels of tech-nical terrains. With both the distributive and disruptive as part of its technicity, the technological interweaves trauma as a bricolage of the spectacular, enmeshing public consumption, human suffering and gaze constituting these as modes of transgression in their right. The transferability of affect and the ability to store, record and archive trauma produces an afterlife of trauma such that trauma remains amenable to abstraction between projects of memory, in instilling the sacred and the potential to invoke the profane through acts of violation as violence.

With the coronavirus pandemic and social distancing, the shifting of offline lives to online platforms witnessed new rituals including virtual funerals, make-shift mass graves and the live-streaming of death ceremonies. COVID-19 pro-duced excess deaths such that trauma and technologies intertwined with our secluded lives, re-staging them through technological platforms with the screen as the interface of orientation with the external world occupied by the virus. Tech-nical architectures and their modes of interface hence remodulate trauma through new norms which emerge, and with the pandemic the sanitization of death, dis-ease and dying as part of our modern human condition were further virtualized and re-curated as images and live-streamed events emphasizing the loss of a tangible tactile world of contact, a non-proximate screened world of virtual

humanity. Trauma streamed through conference platforms and death presented through screened cultures revived trauma through the spectre of the screen orifice as imperceptible and visible through technologies which capture and project, importing the stark reality of loss and human touch and death marked through the disappearance of bodies. Trauma as a pervasive condition of the pandemic played out through fallen bodies and inaccessible bodies in hospitals and care homes. Here again the interplay between trauma and the violence of the virus revealed the deep-seated social and economic inequalities in societies, the trauma of the virus revealing the colour line of those in the front line and equally the violent targeting of the Other as those responsible for unleashing the virus (Ibrahim, 2020). If the virus marks out the human respiratory system for attack, bodies in trauma as asphyxiated by the virus are intertextualized with violent and brutal imagery in the 'Blackened' gasp 'I can't breathe'. The struggle to breathe within the pandemic is refracted against the breathlessness of the trauma of racism. There is a vaccination for the former. But sadly not yet for the latter.

Technologies of trauma reveal the social arrangements within which trauma is arranged and co-produced through social relations. Equally our engagements with mediated trauma beyond the recognition of human vulnerability as a universally shared attribute (Butler, 2012) reveals who is constituted as the human subject and how our orientations and affectivity to feel for the other may be mediated through this conjecture, invoking a longer trajectory of how our gaze has been ideologically patterned over time. The digital sphere and the flow of the subjects of trauma into its terrain are not about the complete breakage between the past and present but its co-location with a multitude of agenda which can ahistoricize the present without entirely truncating the historical formulation of bodies as destined for the sacrificial or ordaining some as flesh. New regimes of misogyny, mirth and subversion await the subjects of trauma online simulating new modalities of violence with digital gameplay. The re-mixing of temporalities through features such as live-streaming invests trauma through technologies of speed and turbulence in the digital age, in which both trauma and violence coalesce, targeting flesh and affect without obliterating the distinctions between real and the simulated.

<div align="right">Yasmin Ibrahim</div>

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