

The Recognition of Past Injuries in Post-apartheid South Africa: Embodied Memory in the Anthropology of Law, Trauma and Victimhood

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This paper shall contribute to the questions of how past bodily traumatic experiences find discursive expression in the present time, and how researchers can be mindful of continuities in people's lives and of situations which trigger memory by including the bodily subject position.

The view that the body is constituted has been widely accepted and must be seen as a reaction on the mechanic perspective on the body. This, however, resulted in a view on the body which sees it as «readable» and a carrier of meaning primarily. The body as an object of knowledge and discourse has thus been privileged and the cognitive sphere remained central.

According to Connerton (How Societies Remember, 1989), hermeneutics has privileged «inscribing» practices as opposed to «incorporating» practices as a way of interpretation. Although anthropology has traditionally been looking at non-textual and non-cognitive practices, it has done so as a way of accessing the social structure of a culture and has thus neglected the continuity of collective identity and dichotomy in general. In this vein, Connerton suggests understanding «habit» not in Bourdieu's notion of disposition, i.e. something potential and ever ready to be evoked, but as an embodied and continuously activated state of being. Habit memories are thus sedimented in the bodily appearance. In this paper I want to tease out the consequence of this thinking on the anthropology of law, trauma and victimhood.

In legal thinking, a "victim" is by definition not a process but a status. This is potentially in conflict with how experiences of gross and/or socio-economic human rights violations bear their legacy. In order to contribute to a more established anthropology of the body, I ask for the ways in which traumatic bodily experiences are discursively formed in arenas such as courts, in the context of a victims support group, and in the everyday life of victims. The field is post-apartheid South Africa and its internationally much applauded yet clearly more and more insufficient and short-termed politics of reconstruction, redress and truth recovery. The paper looks at the centrality of the body in the fight for acknowledgement of past injustices and the demand for redress for human rights violations committed by the security branches of the apartheid regime and partially funded by international companies. It further attempts to give some preliminary thoughts on the methodology of intersubjectivity between researcher and the researched in the field of the anthropology of the body.