

Panel Proposal

Trauma and Tissues: The Body as Archive of Lived Experience

Organizers:

Birte Christ (Justus-Liebig-Universität Giessen)
Ruth Gehrman (Johannes Gutenberg-University, Mainz)
Davina Höll (Eberhard Karls University Tübingen)
Diana Wagner (Universität Stuttgart)

Confirmed Speaker:

Prof. Dr. Carmen Birkle (Philipps-Universität Marburg)
“*The Guardian Angel* as Medicated Novel: Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., and the Human Archive”

The biological body is intricately related to its surroundings and can be deeply scarred by the physical as well as psychological trauma it may experience. Following this understanding, the body presents an archive of individual lived experience. This holds specifically true in relation to trauma: As Elaine Scarry writes about physical pain, it “does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language” (4). Even though trauma is thus associated with the tacit, the unspeakable, and the ineffable—with that what resists description and narrative representation—it may find expression in the body.

At the same time, the body is not only linked to individual experience but shaped by socio-political framings of the individual body. Specifically in the U.S. American context, the body also needs to be positioned in a complex net of relations of racial, gendered, and colonial markers. Already the first encounter of European settlers with the Indigenous peoples of the Americas inflicted massive physical and psychological trauma upon Indigenous bodies that left palpable marks. In recent years, much work has been done to “brush history against the grain,” to use Saidiya Hartman’s dictum, and restore the historical silences surrounding the trauma of slavery (12). As the archive runs the risk of “conceal[ing], distort[ing], and silence[ing] as much as it reveals” (Fuentes 48), the bodies of enslaved people – and their representation – themselves form archives of their trauma. Jennifer L. Morgan, for example, shows how early European male writers manipulated representations of African women, emphasizing aspects such as sexuality, nudity, lack of shame and modesty, and easy childbirth; they were often depicted as tough and sturdy, which perpetuated the narrative that stressed their suitability for hard labor (17). Thus, the archive is abundant with images and drawings of African women laboring in the fields, carrying their babies on their backs while simultaneously breastfeeding them over-the-shoulder, without having to interrupt their work.

The body, then, becomes a site of life writing, which is shaped by outside forces and cultural construction but which also reveals its role as an archive of trauma: It appears as part of personal autobiographical narratives of trauma and constitutes its own “trauma archive” by documenting

fragmented memories of experiences that shatter and destabilize the sense of self. When, according to Foucault, “[t]he archive is first the law of what can be said” (145), and trauma has been related to what cannot be expressed with language (Scarry 4), how can bodily and/or embodied knowledge be archived? What are the limits of the speakable in these processes of archiving? How have gendered, racialized, or marginalized bodies spoken or have been spoken for in archiving practices? What kind of accounts - written, visual, sonic, or physical – testified to these, often submerged, knowledges of the body? What can be understood as “archivable” in these contexts?

This panel invites papers that engage with the intersection of the body, trauma, and the archive, putting the past in conversation with the present and future in U.S. American contexts. Contributions might address but are by no means limited to the following topics:

- (Hi)stories of bodily/embodied knowledge
- Narrative form in archiving the body (genre and metaphor)
- Body modification as a form of archiving lived experience (tattoos, piercings but also prostheses)
- The body as an archive of slow violence
- Scars as archives of trauma (also in the context of wars, colonial violence, or forced sterilization)
- Body politics and the archive
- The post-partum body
- Archiving the body in evidence chambers
- Ethics of archiving (e.g., the handling of human remains, especially from colonial contexts, exhibition of plastinates)
- The intersection of trauma, racialized, gendered and sexualized bodies
- Archiving the traumatic experiences of marginalized groups
- The absence of specific bodies and their experiences in the archive

Works Cited

- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. John Hopkins UP, 1996.
- Fuentes, Marissa. *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*. U of Pennsylvania P, 2016.
- Foucault, Michel. *Archaeology of Knowledge*. 1st publ., Repr, Routledge, 2009.
- Hartman, Saidiya. “Introduction.” *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* by Saidiya Hartman. 1997. W. W. Norton & Company, 2022, pp. 1-18.
- Morgan, Jennifer L. *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*. U of Pennsylvania P, 2004.
- Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford UP, 1985.