

# Introduction: Approaching Trauma through Laughter, Betrayal, and Othering

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Trauma has become a popular media topic in the last few decades and is featured widely in global societal discussions. At the same time, trauma has become an increasingly visible object of research in disciplines ranging from humanities to social sciences. Due to its increased visibility, the concepts, research questions, and viewpoints applied in studying trauma have multiplied and quickly expanded the research from the psychological aspects of trauma to its social, political, and cultural aspects (Kaplan 2005, 25), including the mechanisms of survival (Bond & Craps 2020, 139–41).

The theme issue, *Approaching Trauma Through Laughter, Betrayal, and Othering*, focuses on three potentially traumatizing cases in Finnish, Estonian, and North American contexts in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. On the one hand, the issue examines large-scale, collective events, such as the forced migration of the Estonian population to Siberia in the 1940s and mobility from North America to the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s. On the other hand, the theme issue studies the challenging or violent experiences of migrant individuals in Finland in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as exclusion, othering, and aggression.

The theme issue examines these traumatic experiences through individual and collective viewpoints in the methodological frame of cultural studies. The theme issue approaches trauma through different modalities of narration: TV comedy shows, newspapers, and literatures. In these modalities, trauma is understood as a historical process where the levels of individuality and collectivity vary in relation to time, modalities of narration as well as in cultural, societal, and political contexts. In addition, trauma is examined through concepts closely linked with trauma, such as gallows humor, laughter, betrayal, and exclusion through othering and bordering. These concepts reveal the alternative ways to address trauma and the responses to trauma. They also reveal various cultural and social dimensions of trauma and their changing, or even competing meanings of trauma. The complex ways of addressing trauma are related to cultural, and social practices, and even everyday language. Therefore, as Antonio Traverso and Mick Broderick (2010, 4–5) suggest trauma has become one of the central terms through which the links between social history, subjective experience, and cultural representations can be examined. Trauma can also function as an instrument of research. As Jeffrey Alexander (2004, 2) notes cultural trauma can illuminate

the relationships between structures, perceptions, and actions, constituting an emerging domain of social responsibility and political action. Illuminating these complex relationships, the genealogy of trauma can be reconstructed. Following Alexander's thought further, trauma can be an instigator of social, cultural, and political change.

The theme issue aims to contribute to the multidisciplinary approaches of trauma research in humanities and border and mobility studies. The theories and concepts of humanist trauma research of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, together with viewpoints and approaches in folklore research, media, literature research, and border and mobility studies form the primary theoretical context for this theme issue. One of the central theoretical discussions is the pluralistic trauma model introduced by Michelle Balaev (2014). According to this model, Balaev (2014, 5) argues that contemporary trauma research includes several approaches to trauma, that are often used in place of the classical psychological model. Balaev further argues that the pluralistic model can combine various theories, including psychoanalytic theory, postcolonial theory, and, for example, various theories stemming from cultural studies to provide different analytical lenses on trauma. Therefore, the model allows more thorough examination of trauma's social and political dimensions.

Furthermore, according to Balaev (2014, 6–7), the pluralistic trauma model shifts the focus of research from the unrepresentability and unspeakability of trauma to the uniqueness of trauma. The shift to uniqueness of trauma allows the examination of the traumatic experience in its social and cultural contexts and allows the questions of representation and signification of trauma. The pluralistic trauma model also critically examines the idea of the universality of trauma and focuses on the language and experience of trauma, thus allowing for a more diverse conceptualization and understanding of trauma.

One of the thought-provoking trends in trauma research is the expansion of the trauma concept from single, large-scale and catastrophic events (such as war or terrorism) to include cumulatively developing traumas that develop over a longer period in everyday contexts (Brown 1991). This type of trauma, the so-called insidious trauma, was introduced in trauma research already in the 1990s (Brown 1991, 128; Kaplan 2007, 144). The causes of insidious trauma are, for example, discrimination, exclusion, and the abusive use of power. These long-term cumulative experiences may have similar effects on the human psyche than single, traditionally defined trauma events.

The concept of insidious trauma helps make visible such traumatic experiences among various minority groups that had long remained almost invisible to the dominant groups in their societies. The concept of insidious trauma resembles the concepts of minority stress and cumulatively developing complex post-traumatic stress disorder (ICD-11). The concept of minority stress is frequently used to study the experiences of different minorities (Meyer 1995). CPTSD has been defined as a trauma that is not connected to any specific, single event but rather a complex array of external, highly distressing events that have taken place over several months, even years in a person's life.

In the context of border and mobility studies, the theme issue focuses on difficult experiences of mobility and encounters from the point of view of individuals, families,

and marginal and repressed groups (Kurki & Laurén 2012; Tanttu 2014; 2017; Kurki 2021a; Laurén & Malinen 2021; Laurén & Jaago 2022). The theme issue attempts to create a ‘from below’ understanding of mobility, borders, and cultural encounters but does not forget that trauma is also relevant to interpersonal and cultural processes.

In addition, the articles in this theme issue are contributed to the discussion of multidisciplinary approaches in trauma research. Multidisciplinary approaches are essential in recognizing the cultural and social processes that may lead to traumas, and recognizing traumas that may be invisible to the majority. Furthermore, multidisciplinary approaches may increase our understanding of culturally specific ways of addressing trauma, the construction of the cultural and collective significance of trauma, and the use of trauma in constructing collective pasts, presents, and futures. The theme issue participates in discussing how trauma that emerges in everyday contexts, and how to process trauma individually or collectively, could be approached through various clustering concepts and cultural processes linked to trauma.

The first article in this theme issue is Liisi Laineste’s article *Laughing through Tears: Online Reactions to Trauma-Related Humor in Estonia*. Laineste’s article analyzes examples of trauma-inspired gallows humor in Estonian public discourse. Her article discusses reactions to humorous takes on collective trauma concerning WWII and its aftermath and the Soviet occupation of Estonia, including forced migration, and analyses them against recent humor theory.

Saija Kaskinen’s article, *The Story of Migration and Betrayal: Finnish-Americans Coming Down with Karelian Fever*, examines a so-called ‘betrayal trauma,’ and the “institutionalized” betrayal trauma of the rising Karelian Fever of the 1920s and early 1930s in North America. The purpose is to investigate the role of radical Finnish language newspapers and their influence on the decisions of the thousands of North American Finns to move to the Soviet Union to build the so-called the “Workers’ Paradise” (Golubev & Takala 2014, 68). The article analyses the betrayal trauma in interpersonal and institutional relationships where history and decision making are based on deception and self-deception. In the creation of betrayal trauma, powerful images and mass media are used to create a defactualized world that influences the decision-making of individuals.

Tarja Tanttu and Tuulikki Kurki’s article *Odd One Out: Writers Addressing Othering and Exclusion in Finland* examines how immigrant authors address othering and exclusion and the consequences of these processes from the perspective of constructing cultural citizenship and belonging. These themes have become visible globally in recent migrant literature (Glesener 2016). The article attempts to elicit perspectives on the so-called ‘insidious trauma’ and categorize the rejections and harmful encounters that are enacted in everyday interactions that can lead to its development. The article connects with the discussion about insidious traumas and difficult experiences experienced by various minorities, such as by migrants. The article aims to increase the understanding of social and cultural processes and structures that may lead to trauma, as many of these processes and structures may be invisible to members of the dominant culture.

The theme issue claims that trauma and its related cultural expressions create rup-

tures in the fabric of social and political conformity and collective consciousness. Border and mobility-related traumas reveal the power mechanisms embedded in cultural processes of ordering, bordering, and othering. The cultural and national order, and political and ideological order are subverted through trauma narration that exposes the difficult experiences of dislocated people living in forced exile, at geographical and territorial borders and borderlands, and at the symbolic borders and borderlands within society. The symbolic borders and borderlands exist and operate deep within society and are, therefore, often invisible to the representatives of the majority. Revealing these traumatizing borders and encounters challenge the dominating order and processes of ordering, bordering, and othering (Kurki & Kaskinen 2019; Kurki 2021a; Tantt & Kurki in this issue). Furthermore, the shared border and mobility-related traumatic experiences and their narrative knowledge can function as a basis for de-centered and de-territorial identities. These emerging identities challenge territorially and nationally oriented, homogenizing definitions of identity. Therefore, shared border and mobility-related trauma narratives reveal often the overlooked diversity of people and their experiences living in various borderlands.

This theme issue is based on the work of the research project 'Traumatized Borders: Reviving subversive narratives of b/order, and other' that was funded by the Academy of Finland and implemented at the Karelian Institute in the University of Eastern Finland in 2016–2020 (Kurki et al. 2016). The project investigated oral, written, and material narratives about difficult, even traumatic experiences related to various topographic and symbolic borders in Russian, Finnish, Estonian, Ukrainian, and North American contexts. Geopolitically the project focused on the contemporary EU-Russian border, former Soviet internal borders, and the historical Soviet Union border with the West, whose influence reaches even the North American context. The study covered the period between the 1920s to the present day. The main results are available in the publications by the project researchers in 2016–2022 (Jaago 2021; Kurki 2016; 2018; 2020; 2021a; 2021b; Kurki & Kaskinen 2019; Laurén 2017; 2018; 2019; Laurén & Malinen 2021; Laurén & Jaago 2022; Nugin et al. 2020; Tantt 2017).

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