

TRAUMA, SUFFERING, AND RESILIENCE

Elena de Casas Soberón and Peter Berliner

The article discusses the challenge of using a conceptual framework to understand traumatic stress and still be open to listening to the stories of suffering, of lamentation, grief, hope, and the values of people being oppressed by organised violence. The complexity of responses to the losses caused by the violent oppression is shown through a presentation of the autobiographic book "Cerezas" by Aurora Correa.

1. Introduction

This issue of *Psyke and Logos* is about trauma, suffering, and resilience. The background for the theme of the issue is that traumatic stress has been studied intensely during the last four decades and we have reached a fuller understanding of it. In the development, the focus on symptoms of traumatic stress has been expanded, so it also includes post traumatic growth and resilience (Tedeschi, Park, and Calhoun 1998, Anasarias, Berliner, and de Casas Soberón, 2010).

The concept of post traumatic stress was coined to understand a particular combination of symptoms following a critical incident. This understanding sprang from a needed reduction of the complexity of insecurity and symptoms following a potentially traumatising incident. Similarly, the concept of complex trauma was made to capture the complexity of continuous trauma as one may find in a zone of armed conflict or cases of violent oppression. (Anckermann, Dominguez, Soto, Berliner and Mikkelsen 2005).

To be exposed to critical incidents impacts your life in a variety of ways. In most cases this can best be summarised as suffering. The suffering can be described as depression, grief, and traumatic stress. In the narratives of the victims and the survivors we hear the lament, the cry for justice, and the horror. When we listen to the stories we realise that the diagnostic concepts are not the suffering, but ways of systematising it. The suffering is the lived experience, the meaning, the silences.

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In dictionaries, suffering is defined as the bearing of pain, inconvenience, or loss; as pain endured; as distress or loss; or as pain or sorrow (see also Egnew 2005). Suffering is both individual and social. The theory of social suffering argues that:

“socioeconomic and sociopolitical forces can at times cause disease, as is the case with the structural violence of deep poverty creating the conditions for tuberculosis to flourish and for antibiotic resistance to develop. Second, that social institutions, such as health-care bureaucracies, that are developed to respond to suffering can make suffering worse.(...) Third, social suffering conveys the idea that the pain and suffering of a disorder is not limited to the individual sufferer, but extends at times to the family and social network, as is the case when Alzheimer’s disease has created such serious cognitive impairment in the patient that he or she expresses no discomfort while the adult children experience deep loss and frustration. For global health programmes, the implication is that the family and network may also be in need of health interventions and are often influential in help seeking and adherence. Finally, the theory of social suffering collapses the historical distinction between what is a health problem and what is a social problem, by framing conditions that are both and that require both health and social policies, such as in urban slums and shantytowns where poverty, broken families, and a high risk of violence are also the settings where depression, suicide, post-traumatic stress disorder, and drug misuse cluster. Although there are clearly occasions when health policy and social policy have different targets, in the poorest of communities the medical, the economic, and the political may often be inseparable” (Kleinman 2010:1518).

The theory of social suffering is very useful to the understanding of trauma and traumatic growth as both are contextual and part of a social system. Trauma is part of particular social contexts and people respond to potentially traumatising incidents through social responses. Losses may turn into complex grieving and melancholy or they may be ameliorated through socially organised rituals and social support. Trauma and the response to trauma is a wide and compound process of grieving and support, traumatic stress and post traumatic growth, suffering and resilience. We need to listen to the voices of the impacted people to learn about the complexities of social suffering.

In the research on trauma we have conceptualised the suffering into an understanding, but still we have to continue listening to the complexities of the narratives of trauma, suffering, and resilience. Through listening we realise that stories of trauma are stories of responses, which hold potentials for suffering and resilience at the same time as suffering and resilience are not opposites, but interlinked in a multifarious balance – as a sort of tensegrity, i.e. a balance without a centre.

Resilience can be defined as *both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to health-sustaining resources, and a condition of the individual's family, community and culture to provide these health resources and experiences in meaningful ways* (Ungar 2010: 414). Resilience is a way of addressing and coping with adversities, so that creativity, joy of living, solidarity, and values of caring and respect survive and develop.

It is a way of surviving the bereavement, the loss, the humiliation, the hate, the fragmentation of the social support, and the devaluation of life, of hope, and of dignity.

Eisenbruch wrote about cultural bereavement as the impact of being exposed to war and being in exile:

I defined cultural bereavement as the experience of the uprooted person or group, resulting from loss of social structures, cultural values and self-identity. The person or group continues to live in the past, is visited by supernatural forces, irons the past while asleep or awake, suffers feelings of guilt over abandoning culture and homeland, feels oath if memories of the past begin to fade, but finds constant images of the past (including traumatic images) intruding into daily life, yearns to complete obligations to the dead and feels stricken by anxieties, morbid thoughts, and anger that mar the ability to get on with daily life (1991:674).

However, even from this position, strength and dignity can grow – as valuing life, as being supportive to others, as respect for Human Rights and for human dignity, and as a grace for the beauty of life, the open, the unfinished.

Borges wrote about this in the poem **Los Justos**:¹

*Un hombre que cultiva un jardín, como quería Voltaire.
 El que agradece que en la tierra haya música.
 El que descubre con placer una etimología.
 Dos empleados que en un café del Sur juegan un silencioso ajedrez.
 El ceramista que premedita un color y una forma.
 Un tipógrafo que compone bien esta página, que tal vez no le agrada
 Una mujer y un hombre que leen los tercetos finales de cierto canto.
 El que acaricia a un animal dormido.
 El que justifica o quiere justificar un mal que le han hecho.
 El que agradece que en la tierra haya Stevenson.
 El que prefiere que los otros tengan razón.
 Esas personas, que se ignoran, están salvando el mundo*

1 <http://el-alfeizar-de-dedalus.blogspot.com/2009/06/los-justos-borges.html> Retrieved 12.10.2011

English translation by Alastair Reid:

The just²

*A man who cultivates his garden, as Voltaire wished.
 He who is grateful for the existence of music.
 He who takes pleasure in tracing an etymology.
 Two workmen playing, in a cafe in the South, a silent game of chess.
 The potter, contemplating a colour and a form.
 The typographer who sets this page well though it may not please him.
 A woman and a man, who read the last tercets of a certain canto.
 He who strokes a sleeping animal.
 He who justifies, or wishes to, a wrong done him.
 He who is grateful for the existence of Stevenson.
 He who prefers others to be right.
 These people, unaware, are saving the world.*

When the survivors, the victims, and the now living make an effort for supporting life, then life grows and develops, as Wislawa Szymborska wrote in the poem: **On Death, without Exaggeration.**³

*(....)
 Oh, it has its triumphs,
 but look at its countless defeats,
 missed blows,
 and repeat attempts!
 Sometimes it isn't strong enough
 to swat a fly from the air.
 Many are the caterpillars
 that have out-crawled it.
 All those bulbs, pods,
 tentacles, fins, tracheae,
 nuptial plumage, and winter fur
 show that it has fallen behind
 with its half-hearted work
 (....)
 There's no life
 that couldn't be immortal
 if only for a moment.*

2 Translated by Alastair Reid from: "Insomnia", Six Poems by Jorge Luis Borges, Harper's Magazine, February 1999. <http://poetrydispatch.wordpress.com/2009/04/14/jorge-luis-borges-the-just/> Retrieved 12.10.2011.

3 From "The People on the Bridge", 1986, Translated by S. Baranczak & C. Cavanagh. <http://theartofreading.wordpress.com/2011/02/28/poem-on-death-without-exaggeration/> Retrieved 12.10.2011.



Aurora Correa, 7 years

Death

always arrives by that very moment too late.

*In vain it tugs at the knob
of the invisible door:
As far as you've come
can't be undone.*

The balance of trauma, suffering and resilience are part of the movement of life through transformations, creativity, the unfinished, the unfolding, and the emerging.

We will show this through the story of suffering and resilience of a girl – Aurora Correa – who was a survivor of the Spanish Civil War and exiled in Mexico in 1937, when she was 7 years old, and who later became a writer. The pictures above allow us to see her when she was 7 years old.

The link between overwhelming grief and resilience is shown here through a presentation of one of her books, *Cerezas*. The presentation was written and read in 2008, at the Museum of Aguascalientes in Mexico, by the first author of this article.

2. Cerezas (Cherries)

Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I appreciate the kind invitation to present the most recent novel by Aurora Correa: “Cerezas”, an endearing book. This is a very significant moment to me, because of two reasons: firstly, my friendship with the author, which developed from a shared destiny – and Aurora believed in destiny since her

early childhood. Secondly, the story which unites Aurora and me: the exile in Mexico of Spanish children from Morelia. Just like Aurora my father was one of those children.

The author of this biographic novel reveals the girl's perspective and understanding of the intimate and safe world in which her first, peaceful years of life took place, and of how her innocence was disturbed by the horrors of war and of the deep sadness of her exile.

From the very beginning "Cerezas" evokes a deep feeling of tender love for Little Aurora. She is clever, inquiring, attentive, and full of energy. She meets the world with a free, lively, active, and unembarrassed soul full of friendliness, curiosity and audacity. She has a strong drive for knowledge and is always asking questions to herself and to the others. Moving forward in life, sometimes with pertness of speech and action and even with insolence, grumbling, mischievous attitudes and sudden bursts of passion, she is surrounded by an environment of hard work, but also of endearment, tolerance, free speech, democratic ideals and mutual attachments that allows her to develop an independent, joyful and pleasant sense of existence.

For Aurora, life is a playground where she feels protected by her family and neighbours until the war breaks out. All of a sudden fear and sadness fills her heart. She has outbursts of anger, rebellion, consternation and despair. She suffers from a "shameful" incontinence at night and of hopeless insomnia until the end of her life. At her youngest age, she knows what it is to feel the hunger and the yearning for life. A little girl trapped by the longing of what she has lost: *"Liberal spirit, girl, you have been born twice. You belong to both water and poetry. Aurora, very soon your infancy became old by pain, by sorrow, and by fright."*

"Cerezas" takes us on a journey through the story of Aurora's childhood in Barcelona, seen through the eyes of the child and through the heart of the old writer. A childhood destroyed by the Civil War when she was seven years old. She tells us about the experience of being one of the five hundred Spanish children, who sailed in a big ship, "The Mexique", across the Atlantic Ocean to the distant shore of Mexico – as Mexico supported the Spanish Republic and offered asylum for the children. When they waved goodbye to their country, from France, the children were sure that they would see their parents again soon and that it would all be like a short holiday for them, while their parents would win the war. However, when they arrived at the boarding school in Morelia, they gradually realized that they would not return and the asylum turned into the permanent exile of the Spanish children of Morelia – an exile which for most of them lasted for the rest of their lives.

"Cerezas" tells about a particular way of living – full of caring bonds in the family and between friends and neighbours. It tells about values of freedom which were torn apart by the cruelty of a war "that took power over everyone".

With a beautiful simplicity, through the narration of short conversations, of moments, of ballads, of games and of ordinary life, the author shares with us the joy of living, the love and pleasure she used to share with the small world surrounding her, as well as the tragedy of how these sensations were deeply wounded by the hatred and madness of the war and of the exile.

Little Aurora, you were so deeply in love with the cherry tree in the patio of your home in Barcelona. You climbed it to be the owner of the sun, which shone through its branches and painted your skin with lights and shadows, up to its heights to get closer to the rain that turned you into a flower. You liked to touch and smell the cherries – you took them in your hands and wore them as earrings. Later, on the wide patio of the boarding school in Morelia, you climbed the flagstaff in the same way, longing to find again the Barcelona sea in the distance – but it came back just as absence ...

Aurora tells us about her home “Villa Teresa” in Barcelona and about its trees and flowers; the rabbit hutch and the courtyard; the henhouse, the vine arbour, the orchard, and the little dog “Estrellita”.

She tells us about Father Miguel – more Catalan than Andalusian – who was always in a good mood, full of love for his wife and children, a hard-working cultivator of life, both in his job and in the pleasure of turning the crops of his farm into wonderful food and moments of feasting. He, a traveller and a reader that loved to tell stories about his journeys, gave Aurora the best gift: to read and write.

Mother Demetria, a young woman from Zamora, was always there in Aurora’s early years. Caring, firmly responding to her pranks and guiding her resolutely but with love. After the conflicts, Aurora heard her mother’s laughter and felt relief. Then she ran to chat with her – as both of them were good chatters, especially while she helped her mother with the chores in the house and with the animals, the harvest and the selling of vegetables. Mother was always sustaining life.

Saturdays when friends and neighbours came to the “tertulias”, to sit and talk in the patio under the grapevine – just to be happy together. Almost all of them were immigrants from other parts of Spain and they were hard workers, full of dreams and hope that the Republican government could put an end to poverty. They longed for a better life for their children – a life with a blossoming culture, with equality and justice. The Saturday’s toast by Aurora’s father was “cheers and poverty” – to put an end to it.

The “crime” that the restless girl committed against the Murcian neighbours – a theft of wonderful peas and artichokes.

The gap between Aurora’s personality and that of her elder sister Mitzi’s. She was so cute, so beautiful, that she believed she was superior to Aurora in good manners and high moral. However, later, sadly they were separated

even more when Aurora had to stay in Morelia and Mitzi was taken away to the Trinitarian nuns' boarding school in Puebla.

Raul, her beloved brother, with whom she used to make fun and to do the work in the barn and in the henhouse together. He was the reason why, after escaping several times, little Aurora always returned to the boarding school in Morelia, as she could not bear to leave him there alone.

The kindness and tenderness of the Galician neighbours – always covered with coal dust as they were coal-merchants.

The Andalusians – the drunken plumber and his wife, who was more skilful in the job than him. She was patient with children and very wise in sayings, but rude in words.

The postman was a widowed man, quiet and sad. He used to throw candies to the kids, but to Aurora he gave olives and liquorices – as he knew that she did not like the sweets.

The guard at the cork factory – he was always carrying a rifle and always in a bad mood.

The second-hand clothes dealer and his push cart – smelly and uncultivated, he bought everything from anyone who would sell something to him.

The night watchman, who watched over the sleeping neighbourhood.

The greengrocers with their strange Basque language – he was a bitter man, she was short of words. Both of them watching each of Aurora's moves in their shop, so that she wouldn't rob his vegetables. Nevertheless, they always brought food and fruits to the social gatherings at her parent's house.

Grandma Dolores, Aurora's favourite, an Andalusian woman with eyes of a cat and golden braids. She was fearless, dignified and proud. Her faith was undefined as she wouldn't resign to be an atheist at all. Captivated by her grandchild, she laughed with the girl until losing her breath. Together they were pure fun. Grandma was the loyal accomplice of all of Aurora's adventures. She snuggled Aurora in her bosom, squeezed her with sighs and sang songs ripe with nostalgia. Grandma Dolores always cradled Aurora's love.

This beloved universe, full of fondness and love, was shattered by the war – the Spanish Civil War that rose from the trenches and came like a beast to attack the cities and the people. The Spanish Civil War in which anarchists and fascists equally blamed each other: a malicious fight to the death between brothers.

Suddenly, the most extreme hatred and violence imposed itself on Aurora's daily life. In "Cerezas", the war is seen from the perspective of a little girl: Aurora saw the warmth of their social gathering – the tertulias – wither and disappear. She saw how the lucidity and sanity of all the people around her faded. Dark shadows fell over her little world. Her great expectations of life lessened. She saw how a parallel war of words emerged – a war that without shedding blood would destroy feelings of being at home and destroy the sense of belonging, of having roots. She felt an overwhelming anxiety when she watched how her father became sick of pain and how he refused

to run to the shelters when the air raid sirens sounded. She saw her own hope of attending school die away as the orders of destroying Barcelona were given just on the day she had to start in school. Aurora saw the bitterness of the strange frozen smile of Mrs. Palmira after the day she knew that her son was killed in the trenches. Aurora watched a bomb falling out of the sky and burn down the little forest of her childhood playground. She saw how homes, churches, schools, museums, and avenues were blown away. She saw how the night watchman started to carry a rifle instead of his cudgel and how he was scared to death by the possibility of being taken for a “walk” from which he would never return. Little Aurora felt a rampant hatred for the fascists. She waved goodbye to young neighbours, who voluntarily joined the army and were sent to war without real weapons. She felt Maruxita’s hand holding hers tightly during the bombing of their neighbourhood. She was deafened by the shrill noise of the bombers and the air raid sirens. Mad-dened by anguish she ran to the shelters seeing the great pain and suffering around her. She was horrified and felt her soul fall apart when she ran around a corner and almost fell over dead bodies lying in the street. She played that she was a soldier and she sang the International with her hand raised in a clenched fist salute, while riding on her tricycle. She waved wooden sticks in the air as rifles. Between the screams, moans and the shrill noises of war, little Aurora started to know the silence of terror.

What capacity allowed these children – victims of the war and forced to an exile without return – to stay alive, to become bolder, to sustain hope, to become helpful, to become so conscious and so aware of their existence in despite of their suffering?

What inspired them to learn to respect and take care of their lives and their ideals?

Which strength helped them back to laughter and to play?

Which memories, which voices full of love, reached them through their anguish of death?

Then all is history. The Mexican president Lázaro Cárdenas – who was a political ally to the Spanish Republican Government – invited 500 republican children to enjoy a holiday in Mexico in 1937 – just for a short period of time, while the war was won by the Republicans.

“Cerezas”, the heartbreaking farewell between parents and children at the train station of Barcelona. Between the sounds of the steam, the whistles and the big wheels of the train, desperate cries were heard: “Get off the train, don’t go!” – “I don’t want to leave!” – “Don’t leave me! Stay with me!”

And Little Aurora, delighted by the illusion that her mind built, travelled on that train convinced that she was on her way to a happy holiday. One by one, from the train crossing France, and later from the ship crossing the

Atlantic, she threw the cherries that her mother gave her, to sow them in the air.

Then, the arrival in Mexico: a warm land of hospitality and tenderness that welcomed them as foster children.

However, the Mexican-Spanish Industrial School in Morelia, which at first became their home, soon began to give them a feeling of captivity, as an inmate in a jail, a mental hospital, a monastery or a military quarter: a hell. The children, already traumatised by war and by the separation from their parents and country, were now enduring the trauma of detention and dehumanising treatment by the staff, in despite of the good intentions of President Cárdenas. The first director of the camp, Lamberto, had no experience of this kind of work and he asked for the army to help him to stop the rebellions that sprang up from the strong and mad enthusiasm of the interned children. Again and again he put the emotional and physical life of the children in severe danger, as well as he kept opening the wounds, which he was intended to heal. The next principal of the boarding school, Roberto Reyes Pérez, was an executioner, who organized gangs and other violent groups to discipline the children through violence and abuse. The sadistic teaching methods, the job opportunism and the corruption turned Lázaro Cárdenas' vision of hospitality into a reality of neglect and abuse. The school's ethical values decayed into chaotic and violent forms of educational, ideological, social and sexual practices.

“Cerezas”, Morelia:

Currecha – as Aurora was called in the boarding school – lost her freedom, but she gained five hundred friends. She lost the ability for rational thinking. She formed her own gang “The Sluts”, “friends united so not to lose too much”. They were united when they faced the physical abuse, the humiliation, and above all, the hunger. Currecha – the cold showers and beatings when she wetted her bed at night. Her astonishment and curiosity when she noticed that the language was the same and different at the same time: *calzones* instead of *bragas* (panties), *rancho* instead of *cortijo* (farmhouse), *durazno* for *melocotón* (peach). Her laughter when all the children discovered the corn tortillas and turned them into flying saucers at dinner time. Her surprise when she discovered the Mexican market place, packed with fruit, vegetables, colours and soft fragrant drinks. The happiness of feeling closer to her home, when she saw the *capulines*, a typical Mexican fruit, which is very similar to Spanish cherries in shape and colours but not in taste.

Currecha and her deep gratitude towards exceptional people, who gave her understanding, love and guidance – and who even wanted to adopt her. She felt humble when she was shown generosity by the Mexican people, and above all, by the poorest. Currecha was inspired by her teacher Josefina, who was a great Mexican story teller with a soft, musical language. She also admired Felipa, the indigenous woman who bewitched her, because of her

bravery, her very white teeth, and her absolute power. The happiness of being invited to spend holidays with kind families in Puebla and in Guadalajara, where she was welcomed with attention, love, and respect. Then, incidents like her First Communion, and later, when people realised she was not Catholic, her Baptism and her second First Communion.

Currecha won the award for being the girl who ran away from the boarding school most times. She returned sometimes, because of fear and because she could not bear to leave her brother Raúl, but most of the times, because she was caught and sent back. Always running away with an eagerness to find what she had lost – long escapes “to seek for paradise outside the real world”.

Currecha and the epistolary relation with her parents, year after year. Letters of sighs, moments and hopes of returning. It was in one of these letters that Grandma Dolores had died. In another letter the Republic fell. After that Currecha, hopeless and overwhelmed by despair, was transferred to the city of Puebla, to a very different boarding school that was a convent. At that time she understood that she would never return to her parents: *Little orphan emigrant from the lost hinterland to which you will never return.*

The Children of Morelia learned very early to live without the comfort that ideals and certainties tend to provide. They shared a unique destiny: to let the Spanish Republic stay alive in México. Almost all of them survived the deep wounds made to their tranquillity, to their convictions, and to their identity – and they survived the never resting anguish in their minds. They all suffered from hunger for bread and for love and care. In the centre of their exile, they were also suffering the exile from their childhood, as they could never recover their lost early innocent years with their families, in their homes, in their country. It is remarkable how they could turn the fracture of the exile into a creative building of lives, where they practiced and reinforced their Republican values.

To present “Cerezas” is a symbolic act of homage to the survivors of the war and of the exile.

Aurora, life can only be assumed in the absence. The fantasy and imagination and the passion for stories and words – which made you dream during your childhood – turned you into a writer: Girl of Books, Woman of Books and Grandmother of Books. You were able to transform the indelible wounds and marks of the story of your early childhood into a new writing, into ever new words as a fertile way of addressing the meaning of your life, of your sorrow and of all the battles lost. Here in your writing – facing the ghosts of war and separation and the feeling of loss of what was forever destroyed Aurora, you won.

I specially dedicate this tribute to the memory of my father, Joaquín de Casas López. No words of mine could better express his pain, his fear and his tender innocence than his own words, which are still alive in a letter he wrote – when he was eight years old – from Morelia to his mother, who at that time was a political refugee in France.

July the 1st, 1939

Dear Mother:

We received the letter in which I can see the sorrow you have been going through, because you did not get any information about me. Dear mom, I could not send a letter, because I did not know your new address. But now I know it and I'm happy for writing to you. I will write to you, as I used to, so please, don't grieve no more.

Mom, I would like to know if some day you will come and pick me up here as many parents have done so with the children that came with me.

Mom, also tell me how my brothers are doing in France. Don't worry about me, because nothing bad has happened to me. I did not even go to the infirmary once, so until now, I'm fine.

I send lots of regards to my dad and my brothers and my grandparents.

For you a million kisses from your son who will never forget you.

Joaquín de Casas López.

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