UTILISING SOCIALLY ENGAGED PHOTOGRAPHY AS A METHOD FOR EXPLORING THE SOCIAL LANDSCAPE OF CULTURAL TRAUMA IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Ashle Bailey–Gilreath

UTILISING SOCIALLY ENGAGED PHOTOGRAPHY AS A METHOD FOR EXPLORING THE SOCIAL LANDSCAPE OF CULTURAL TRAUMA IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Abstract

  A growing body of research suggests that the residual effects of the conflict in Northern Ireland have contributed to the cultural trauma of its residents, from those who directly experienced the Troubles, to their children. But what does cultural trauma look like? How has the chronic and enduring underlying fear affecting multiple generations changed the dynamics of families, communities, and the overall culture in Northern Ireland? One way to highlight and investigate the legacy of the Troubles in a meaningful and impactful way is through socially engaged photography. This novel approach can create an accessible and engaging way to involve individuals and communities currently plagued by these issues. This process allows for active engagement, allowing the public to play an integral and collective role in the narrative and process of healing. This is especially important in Northern Ireland, where many of the residents have expressed research fatigue from continuously participating in studies but not feeling as if their voice and concerns are being heard.

KEYWORDS: *socially engaged photography, cultural trauma, Northern Ireland*

Introduction

  Over 20 years has passed since the signing of the Good Friday Peace Agreement, which has been viewed by many[1] as symbolically ending the civil conflict known as the 'Troubles' (Aughey 2005). Starting in the 1970s, this period of violence resulted in thousands of deaths and injuries, as well as countless others suffering psychological damage from the conflict.

  These experiences of widespread trauma permeate all aspects of society, even affecting those who did not experience the conflict directly. Even with a significant decrease in violence since 1998, many important issues and residual effects of the conflict remain unresolved. For example, data reveal an increase in the diagnosis of conflict-related trauma since the signing of the Peace Agreement (Gilligan 2006), most notably in communities where there were higher instances of violence during the Troubles (DHSSPS 2006). In fact, 39% of the Northern Irish population has reported

1. Of note is the 1994 ceasefire agreement between paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland which played an important role in ending the conflict.

experiencing a conflict-related trauma, resulting in Northern Ireland having the highest reported rates of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the world (Bunting et al. 2013).

These staggering statistics provide some evidence of the lingering effects conflict can have on multiple generations, but how does trauma affect an entire culture? This type of transmitted trauma, that not only affects those who witness conflict first-hand but also impacts a culture's shared psychology, has been referred to as 'cultural trauma'. Cultural trauma 'occurs when members of a collective feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways (Alexander 2012, 6). This shared experience becomes part of the narrative a community weaves together about its culture and the world (Volkan 2001). Cultural traumas are similar to other cultural phenomena, wherein they 'persist and continue for much longer than other traumas, frequently even crossing generational boundaries' (Gailienė 2019, 3; Sztompka 2000). Indeed, research has found that children of individuals who experienced cultural trauma are inheriting more than just their physical characteristics, they're absorbing their parents' fears about a past world of danger. The transmission of cultural trauma and memory can be inadvertently passed down through ritual, practices, and symbols. For example, in Northern Irish culture this can be seen by way of parades, flags, peace walls, murals, and bonfires. This memory transmission of important cultural events and the 'cultural narrative about what is being transmitted profoundly shapes the nature of the experience of offspring of trauma survivors' (Lehrner and Yehuda 2018, 14; Mohatt, Thompson, Thai and Tebes 2014).

It is evident from prior research that the conflict in Northern Ireland has contributed to the cultural trauma of its residents, from those who directly experienced the Troubles to their children. But what does cultural trauma look like? How has the enduring experience of trauma changed the dynamics of families, communities, and the overall culture in Northern Ireland? One way to highlight and investigate these questions in a meaningful way is through the use of socially engaged photography. This approach facilitates and supports engagement and open dialogue, allowing communities to play an integral role in the meaning and narrative surrounding such shared trauma.

Socially engaged photography
The concept of socially engaged photography emerged from the community photography movement that took place during the 1970s throughout the United Kingdom. Spearheaded by grassroots organisations, activist groups, and photography collectives, the movement's goal was to democratise the arts by providing spaces and opportunities for the general public to access and learn new skills, as well as provide platforms and outlets where their perspectives could be visualised (Luvera 2019, 5). The community photography movement was 'a way of opening up photography

and empowering marginalised groups to take the lead in making photographic representations of their own lives and experiences' (Connell 2019, 35). The ultimate goal was for this type of photography to become a way for people to 'look at the world differently' and to challenge the norms and potential exploitation sometimes seen in photojournalism and documentary photography (Spence 1976, 1). Ultimately, it allowed for the people who traditionally would be the subject of photographs the opportunity to control the narrative and tell their story, with the hope that it would create positive social change.

 Similarly, *socially engaged photography* facilitates 'a sense of community by engaging people in the process of taking photographs, describing the significance of what is captured, and co-creating a shared narrative about [the] situation that leads to positive individual and collective actions' (Bratchford, Giotaki, and Wewiora 2018, 83). Artists and photographers who pursue socially engaged practices often wish to effect change, highlight systemic issues, and in some ways promote activism.

 While the methodologies used by such photographers are varied, there are common threads found with visual research methods used in sociological and anthropological research. However, the most important aspect of socially engaged photographic practice, and that which sets it apart, is the role that the 'participant' plays in the work. Socially engaged photography balances the relationship between the process and the output, as well as the community with the image production. As a result, the authorship of the images is shared between the photographer and the subject(s). The participatory process of creating the images is as important as the final work. These additional methods provide the participants an outlet that allows their voice and personal experiences to be heard, in addition to being seen.

 It is important to briefly examine the concept of participation in order to fully define how participants interact with, and engage in, such practice-based research. While there are a number of positions taken on defining exactly what is participation, research has identified 'three core elements of participation: cognitive, to generate different understandings of a particular reality; political, to empower the voiceless; and instrumental, to propose new alternatives' (Taylor 2014, 22; Rahnema 1992, 121). Participation can range in its 'levels of empowerment', which can cause the act of participation to vary from empty ritual to real power that affects change (Arnstein 1969). Additionally, participatory acts can range from active to passive. Active participation can be understood as falling into one of four typologies: *full empowerment*, where the participant plays the central role of decision-maker; *collaboration*, wherein the direct participation takes place during the implementation stage of the project; a lesser active role in which the participant *provides information*; and *incidental expression,* wherein the participation is limited to proving impact statements (Taylor 2004). Indirect participation is present in two forms, a passive form of *collaboration* in which each individual is not represented fully, but rather through a 'central voice' and *notification*, or

the process of informing individuals through developed discourse.

   Below, I discuss two case studies of socially engaged photographic works that attempt to bring attention to two issues through different levels of participation: the first being the cultural trauma experienced by the Kurdish people during their displacement in the 1980–1990s, and the second surrounds the systemic issues of homelessness in the United Kingdom. When attempting to address complex issues such as these, it is necessary to consider a method that goes beyond a single application or workshop. As with other applied arts projects, successful socially engaged photography should be 'grounded in a commitment to listen to communities and enable community-driven change; and is linked to conceptual frameworks with long-term perspectives on participatory methods, social change and the role of the arts within those processes' (Fairey 2018, 5). The examples below provide unique but equally effective case studies that support this.

Case studies
Susan Mieselas – Kurdistan
   Susan Mieselas's photographic work on Kurdistan originally began as a mission of traditionally documentary photography. This changed after she witnessed the 'exhumation of mass graves in northern Iraq, the result of Saddam Hussein's genocidal campaign against the Kurds in 1987 and 1988' (CCP 2012). Realising the magnitude of this cultural trauma, she 'began to gather every scrap of visual evidence – documents, family pictures, maps, personal stories – to build a public archive of the history of the displaced Kurdish people' (ibid)[2] (see Figure 1). Meiselas became drawn to the narrative and complexities behind the individuals and events that had been so publicised through the media and documentary photography. With this in mind, she tasked herself with gathering the collective memory of the Kurdish people stating, 'What I wanted to do was look at a photograph not as an object, but as something we could re-embed in the history of a people, expanded and anchored by others'.

   Clayton states that: 'however' the 'concept of identity' has been formed, it has 'peculiar documents around it' (East 2019). To do this, she worked closely with families from the Kurdish diaspora, adding family photos, documents, and memories in order to tell their stories. Eventually, Meiselas found herself not taking photographs anymore but spending the majority of her time meeting and speaking with families and documenting the items they provided her. In this respect her voice and agency as the 'photographer' receded, allowing the voices and stories of the Kurdish people to take centre stage. The exhibitions, website, and book dedicated to the project provide painstaking documentation of the 'history of a people who don't have a homeland and have no national archive' (East 2019). This body of work, which is still evolving, has been

2. Meiselas, Susan. Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History. c. 1997. Susan Meiselas website, accessed 2 June 2020, https://www.susanmeiselas.com/archive-projects/kurdistan/#id=book_site

exhibited widely throughout Europe[3] (see Figure 2). At each of the exhibitions Meiselas invited displaced Kurds to bring with them memories and items they would like to share, incorporating them in the show.
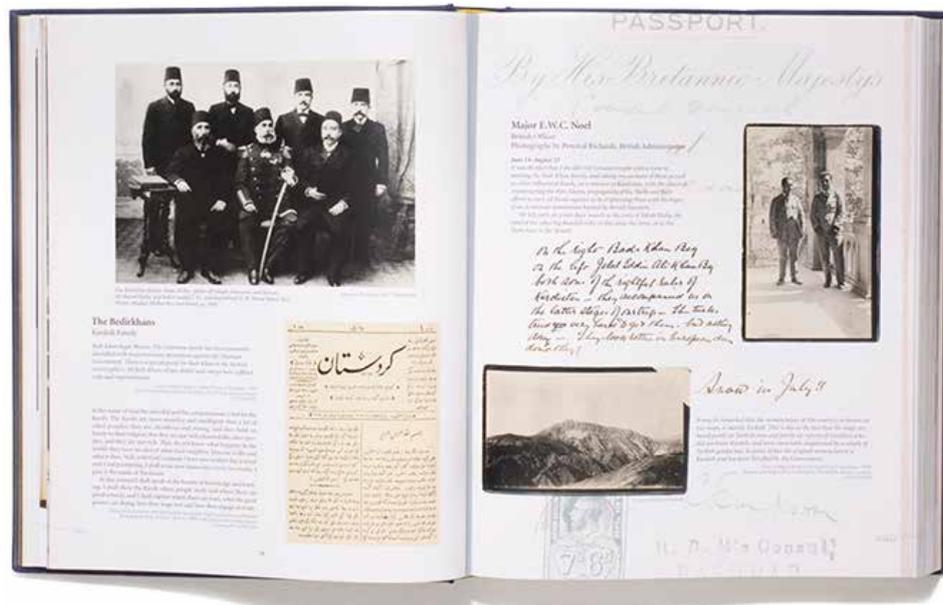

Figure 1. Excerpt from the book form of Susan Meiselas's Kurdistan project, titled 'Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History'.

Figure 2. (From Left) aka KURDISTAN installation. Kunsthalle Exnergasse, Vienna. 2015; aka KURDISTAN exhibition storymap detail. The Photographers' Gallery. 2019.

3. Meiselas, Susan. AkaKURDISTAN. British Journal of Photography, accessed 2 June 2020, https://www.bjp-online.com/2019/05/susan-meiselas-a-space-for-collaboration/

The communities that participated felt that they were an intricate part of the storytelling process. This was particularly meaningful to the individuals who contributed their artefacts to the story, especially after living in exile and being displaced from their homeland. In this respect, Meiselas' methods were particularly effective in communicating the symbolic and emotional aspects of this community's experiences, more so than traditional documentation would have captured. This is especially important when communicating such trauma to an outside audience, as 'most official histories are only one perspective, they often don't include the daily lives of those most impacted by dramatic events. We need to hear those voices' (Abel-Hirsch 2019). Meiselas has made it her mission to not only document this tragedy, but to ensure their stories are heard, and to create a wider dialogue around the events with the outside world. At each of the exhibitions, Meiselas organises a multi-day workshop for the local Kurdish community, working closely with participants to incorporate their memories into booklets that they make during the workshop. These booklets are then added to the maps in the exhibition by the participants. This creates a collaborative process in the design and implementation of some aspects of the project as well as allowing members of a once displaced community to come together and participate in a true social activity. The project is still ongoing as Meiselas works with Kurdish people throughout the world to continue gathering the visual history of their stories, experiences, and desire for a homeland.

Anthony Luvera – Taking Place

Anthony Luvera is another socially engaged photographer who sought to shed light on a marginalised and displaced community: that of the homeless in England. In *Taking Place*, Luvera 'uncovers the shocking and poignant challenge faced by those experiencing homelessness and asks audiences to consider the narratives and dimensions that can be shared through a collaborative approach to different creative mediums, radically refocusing centres of power'(Luvera 2020). Since 2013, Luvera has worked collaboratively with homeless individuals to give them the tools of photography and sound recording to document their experiences. They meet together regularly throughout this collaboration in order to talk about the work the individuals have created, as well as their personal experiences. Luvera also co-creates self-portraits with these individuals by teaching them how to use a medium- format camera over multiple sessions. The self-portrait locations are chosen by each of the participants who also take their own photograph by using a shutter release cable[4] (see Figure 3). Luvera not only gives the 'subject' the skills they need to take the images, but also the ability to choose how to narrate and represent their experiences and facilitates open dialogue about the issues they face. These are important examples of the power shift that occurs in socially engaged photography.

---

4. Luvera, Anthony. 'Taking Place' c. 2019, The Gallery at Foyles, accessed 2 June 2020
https://www.galleryatfoyles.com/taking-place

Figure 3. Anthony Luvera (right) working with an individual on their self-portrait.

Additionally, policy and legislation on these topics is 'an important aspect of the research underpinning Luvera's practice with homeless individuals' (Luvera 2014). In collaboration with one of his participants, Gerald Mclaverty, Luvera highlights the true scale of the homelessness crisis by exhibiting a qualitative inquiry[5] through correspondence with '110 local authorities across the UK on the services available for people experiencing homelessness' (Luvera 2020) (see Figure 4). While many could not provide basic replies to questions such as 'Where can I go for something to eat?' or 'Where can I find shelter when it is raining or snowing?', 41 of the councils did not reply at all. This is disheartening on many levels, but especially given the 2017 Homelessness Reduction Act, which legally requires councils to actively address some of the questions raised in their letters. Luvera's work shows the intricate and long-standing relationship that takes place between the photographer and the community they work with, as well as highlighting the importance of the narrative and dialogue that is created not only within the community, but with the general public through exhibitions, public awareness, activism campaigns, and open discussion. Through this work Luvera has created a platform for raising awareness on the issue of homelessness and has given a face and voice to the statistics.

---

5. Luvera, Anthony, and Gerald Mclaverty. 'Frequently Asked Questions' 2017, Photopedagogy, accessed June 2, 2020 https://www.photopedagogy.com/representing-homelessness.html
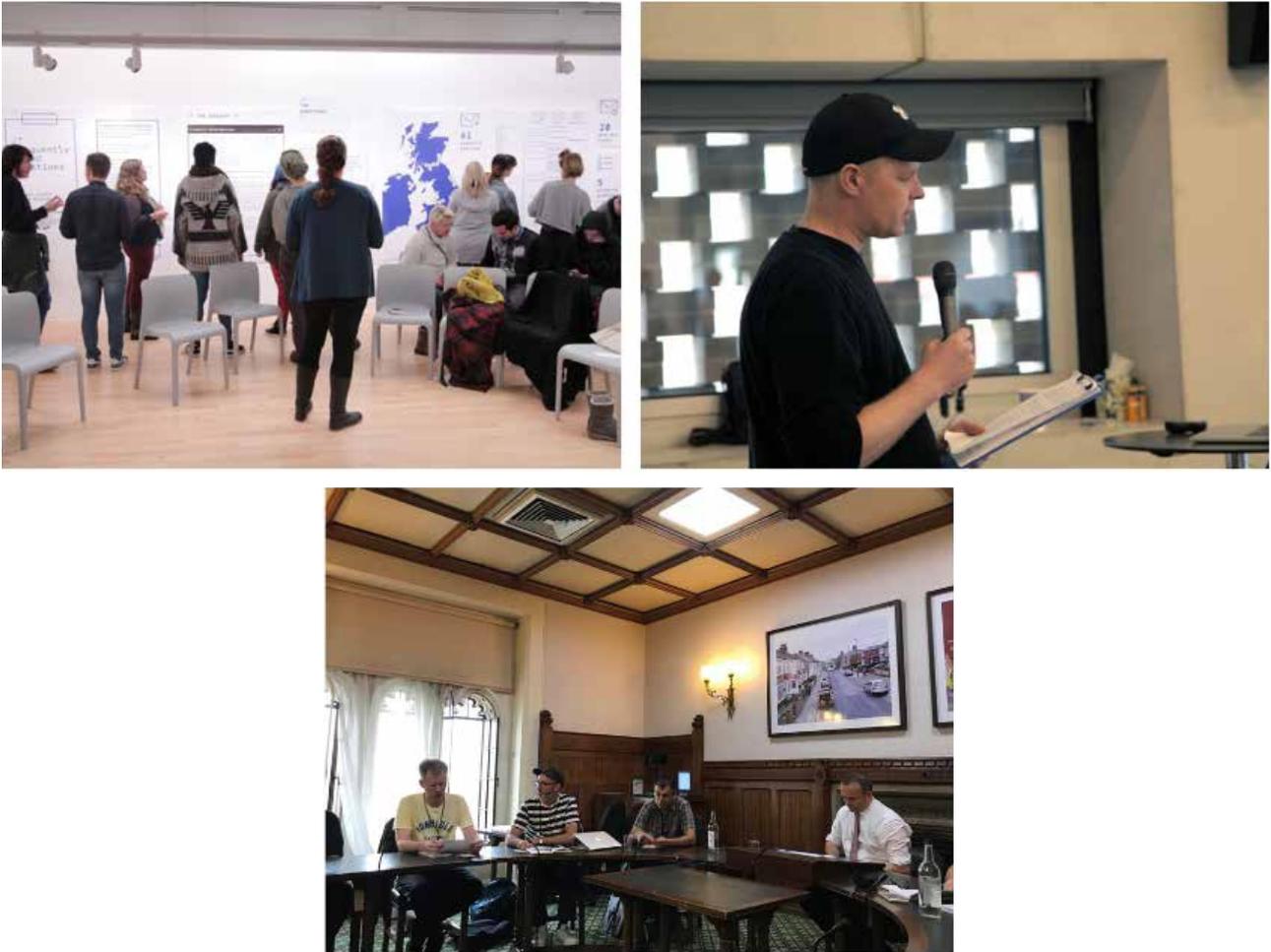
Figure 4. From left: Frequently Asked Questions, Wall installation, Tate Liverpool, 2018; Gerald McLaverty presenting Frequently Asked Questions at State of the Nation, Museum of Homelessness, Tate Modern, 2017; Luvera and Mclaverty presenting at Houses of Parliament, 2019.

Northern Ireland context

The expansive research on Northern Ireland and the community level work that has been carried out to address the legacy of the Troubles is undeniably important. And whilst there are many different and effective ways to address these issues, I propose that socially engaged photography may be used as a complementary method by providing a humancentred and collaborative approach to discussing cultural trauma. Socially engaged photographic projects can create an accessible and engaging way to involve individuals and communities in open dialogue about the legacy of the Troubles. This process allows for active engagement, allowing the public to play an integral and collective role in the meaning making and narrative surrounding such issues. This is especially important in Northern Ireland, where many of the residents feel exploited by past research in their communities, continuously participating in studies but not feeling as if their voice and concerns are being heard.

The emphasis socially engaged photography places on the role of the participant is important in order to give a face, voice, and a personalised narrative to the myriad effects cultural trauma is having on communities in Northern Ireland. Such a project could help facilitate meaningful interaction and dialogue with all sides of the conflict, allowing residents of different communities to better understand each other. For example, socially engaged projects could allow residents of different communities to not only learn more about each other, but also share the social and emotional effects of the Troubles they are still grappling with. Additionally, this may reveal that they face similar issues and have more in common than not. Participants from all communities would work together in deciding how the project is structured, how it is disseminated, and how it would directly benefit their communities. This process gives them a voice and prominent role that traditional research typically does not allow for. Of course, there are ethical and methodological issues that need to be carefully addressed when carrying out such a project, especially in a divided society such as Northern Ireland. While socially engaged projects offer a number of important contributions to addressing legacy issues, there are still significant limitations that should be recognised when developing such initiatives. The nature and limitations of participation should be carefully considered, and particular attention should be paid to partiality, representation, understanding the meaning of 'truth' and 'memory' and how this translates to different communities, the risk of re-traumatisation, and the conscientious role 'participants' play in the decision-making process.

Socially engaged photography offers an outlet that supports and complements traditional qualitative inquiry by providing different perspectives and approaches. It can provide a platform for raising awareness or generating dialogue and questions around important and complex issues, oftentimes more so than traditional qualitative methods in specific circumstances. It also allows individuals to share the emotional and symbolic aspects of their experiences that may not be accessed through verbal or written responses. Socially engaged photography addresses power dynamics often seen in research on social issues and in conventional documentary photography. By providing an opportunity for the participant to be in a collaborative and equal position with the photographer, it allows them to reflect on the issue in a more meaningful way. The underpinnings of socially engaged photographic projects provide a rich platform for healing from cultural trauma and creating a space for open dialogue and engagement, as well as 'imagin[ing] new social forms, new power dynamics, [and] new social relationships on individual and institutional levels' (Gregory 2014, 3).

References

Abel-Hirsch, Hannah. 2019. Susan Meiselas: *'A space for collaboration'.* British Journal of Photography, May 15. **https://www.bjp-online.com/2019/05/susan-meiselas-a-spacefor- collaboration/**

Alexander, Jeffery C., Ron Eyerman, Bernard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka. 2004. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity.* University of California Press.

Arnstein, Serry R. 1969. *'A Ladder of Citizen Participation'.* Journal of the American Planning Association 35(4): 216–224.

Aughey, Arthur. 2005. *The Politics of Northern Ireland: Beyond the Belfast Agreement.* Routledge.

Bratchford, Gary, Gina Giotaki, and Liz Wewiora. 2018. *'Socially engaged photography and wellbeing: reflections on a case study in the northwest of England'.* London Journal of Primary Care 10(4): 82–88.

Bunting, Brendan P., Fiona R. Ferry, Samuel D. Murphy, Siobhan M. O'Neill, and David Bolton. 2013. *Trauma associated with civil conflict and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder: evidence from the Northern Ireland study of health and stress. Journal of Traumatic Stress 26: 134–141.*

Center for Creative Photography (CCP). 2012. Susan Meiselas: *From the Field to the Archive – Nicaragua to Kurdistan.* Center for Creative Photography University of Arizona, October 25. **https://ccp.arizona.edu/exhibitions-events/events/susan-meiselas-fieldarchive-nicaragua-kurdistan**

Department of Health, Social Services and Personal Safety (DHSSPS). 2006. *Protect Life. A Shared Vision: the Northern Ireland Suicide Prevention Strategy and Action Plan 2006–2011.* Belfast, Northern Ireland.

East, Ben. 2019. *'Susan Meiselas's three decades long journey photographing the Kurds.'* The National, 26 March. **https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/art/susanmeiselas-s-three-decades-long-journey-photographing-the-kurds-1.841449**

Fairey, Tiffany. 2018. 'Participatory Arts and Peace-Building: Embodying and Challenging Reconciliation'. In *Participatory Arts for Invisible Communities: PAIC* edited by Irena Sertić, 204–14. Omnimedia.

Gailienė, Dauntė. 2019. 'When culture fails: coping with cultural trauma'. *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 64(4): 530– 547.

References

Gilligan, Chris. 2006. 'Traumatised by Peace? A Critique of Five Assumptions in the theory and practice of conflict-related trauma in Northern Ireland'. *Policy & Politics*

Gregory, Eliza. 2014. '*Photo-based Social Practice: A discussion of socially engaged, transdisciplinary, and expanded practices in contemporary photography'.* A Social Practice, May 15. **https://www.asocialpractice.com/photo-based-social-practicebroadsheet/**

Lehrner, Amy, and Rachel Yehuda. 2018. 'Cultural trauma and epigenetic inheritance'. *Development and Psychopathology* 30(5): 1–15.

Luvera, Anthony. 2014. Assembly, Brighton Photo Fringe, Phoenix Brighton. *Anthony Luvera,* October 4. **http://www.luvera.com/assembly**

Luvera, Anthony. 2019. ''*Photography for Whom'?* Photography for Whom 1

Luvera, Anthony. 2020. Taking Place. *Anthony Luvera*, January 11. **http://www.luvera.com/taking-place**

Mohatt, Nathaniel Vincent, B. Azure, Thompson, Nghi D. Thai, and Jacob Kraemer Tebes. 2014. 'Historical trauma as public narrative: A conceptual review of how history impacts present-day health'. *Soc. Sci. Med. 106: 128–136.*

Rahnema, Majid. 1992. 'Poverty'. In *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power,* edited by W. Sachs.

Sztompka, Piotr. 2000. 'Cultural Trauma: The Other Face of Social Change'. *European Journal of Social Theory* 3(4): 449–66.

Taylor, David. 2014. *Victim Participation in Transitional Justice Mechanisms: Real Power or Empty Ritual?* Impunity Watch.

Volkan, Vamik D. 2001. 'Transgenerational Transmissions and Chosen Traumas: An Aspect of Large-Group Identity'. *Group Analysis 34: 79–97.*