Democratic Insecurities: Violence, Trauma, and Intervention in Haiti

John Mazzeo, DePaul University

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JOHN MAZZEO
DePaul University

In Democratic Insecurities: Violence, Trauma, and Intervention in Haiti, medical and psychiatric anthropologist Erica C. James offers readers a vivid and uncompromising ethnographic account of the mostly female victims of politically motivated violence and the unsettling business of international humanitarian aid. James outlines a “political economy of trauma” in which the experiences of viktim (pronounced “veek-teem”), a Haitian Creole term she adapts to identify individuals who suffered human rights abuses, are extracted, transformed, and modified through a humanitarian intervention and become a source of profit and power for intervening organizations. The analysis constructs a political economy of trauma through a careful consideration of history avoiding the all-too-common ahistorical treatment of Haiti that pervades the literature and press. Her work forges new ground through the study of a “compassion economy” in which trauma portfolios become commodities created using “technology of trauma” whereby viktim recount the abuses they suffered to qualify for humanitarian assistance. The value of
trauma portfolios, like the value of commodities, reflects the perceived usefulness to the consumer. In this case, the value of portfolios depended on their worth to U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)–Haiti as a means of demonstrating its success in promoting democracy and human rights to USAID/Washington.

James’s account of victims’ experiences and the structures of international aid are based on primary research conducted during more than 27 months of fieldwork between 1995 and 2000 in the capital city of Port-au-Prince. The depth of perspective in her ethnography is achieved through a mixed-methods and multisited fieldwork project both planned and designed during the course of fieldwork. James’s formal academic training and experience as a therapeutic practitioner using the “Trager Approach,” a form of therapy that relies on gentle physical manipulation to release long-held patterns of tension in the body. Her ability as an ethnographer and a therapeutic practitioner facilitates her access and interactions with a range of stakeholders including victims, clinicians, scholars, and aid bureaucrats. Her goal is to study the complexities of democracy and civil society building by transnational organizations and the experiences of individuals who suffered human rights abuses during the 1991–94 period of de facto political rule in Haiti. To this end, James uses a range of methods, including archival research, interviews, participant-observation, and clinical practice. The core of the text is built on primary data collected through interviews with victims and is situated in the context of her clinical work. James’s masterful ability to navigate clinical, scholarly, and bureaucratic landscapes provides readers with insights from a variety of perspectives. In addition to extensive therapeutic work with patients followed by in-depth interviews, James’s work with America’s Development Foundation (ADF) Human Rights Fund, USAID, and
Haiti’s State University Hospital Mars–Kline Center for Neurology and Psychiatry offer other valuable perspectives.

The book has renewed relevance for a Haiti still recovering from the devastating 2010 earthquake. Although some context of suffering in Haiti has changed since the 1990s, James’s analysis of how international organizations commodify and circulate trauma portfolios for their own purposes is still a relevant in the postquake context. In particular, her treatment of the ethical debates involving the motivations of donors and humanitarian aid organizations during crisis and the ways in which victims are triaged for the distribution of aid. Additionally, James’s analysis of insecurity and gender violence is particularly relevant for understanding the violence against women being perpetrated in camps throughout Port-au-Prince by residents and humanitarian aid workers alike. Her study demonstrates how transitions in Haiti’s political and economic position can manifest in targeted violence and emphasizes caution to those involved in planning Haiti’s transition from a state of emergency. The lessons learned from the failure of ADF, which are not unique for international organizations in Haiti, should encourage readers to consider the limits and alternatives to donor driven, transnational humanitarian assistance.

In its broader implications, this innovative study design, both in terms of its conceptual and methodological approaches, is transferrable to other postdisaster contexts and offers a useful model of mixed, multisited, and applied research. James challenges readers to consider how the introduction of foreign aid in emergency situations can have unintended consequences for those populations deemed to be the most vulnerable. Her description of “bureaucraft,” the practices of humanitarian bureaucrats that resemble
witchcraft and shape the political economy of trauma, captures how conflicts within and
between aid organizations are ultimately about establishing power through the control of
trauma portfolios. This study makes significant contributions to recent debates in
anthropology about disasters and the complex position of applied researchers as both
critics of and participants in structures of humanitarian assistance. James does not avoid
this dilemma, but is transparent and reflexive about how she personally and
professionally adapts to this difficult environment.

In conclusion, the study deals with a critical turning point of Haiti’s recent
history, its turbulent transition to democratic rule, and considers the voices and
experiences of those who paid dearly during this historical moment. The text is a
significant contribution to Haitian studies, critical medical anthropology of trauma, and
the anthropology of development. If there is anything problematic about this book,
published as part of the California Series in Public Anthropology, it is excessive use of
jargon, making portions of the text inaccessible to the public. Despite its cumbersome
language, the book is an outstanding example of how public anthropology and applied
research can engage audiences across disciplines and sectors.