

Traumatic pasts and the historical imagination: Symptoms of loss, postcolonial suffering, and counter-memories among African migrants

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Roberto Beneduce
University of Turin

Abstract

This work aims to rethink the relationship between anthropology and cultural psychiatry from a historical perspective, through reflections on the dynamics of forgetting and remembering in the context of migration. While migrants' symptoms often bear cultural hallmarks of suffering, they also reveal images of a traumatic history, which resurface in moments of danger, uncertainty, and crisis. I claim these symptoms are allegories of a dispossessed past, and can be interpreted as counter-memories, as "palimpsests" of an eclipsed script. Trauma symptoms keep returning to a collective past, and thus can be considered a particular form of historical consciousness. Psychiatric diagnoses may obscure these counter-memories. In particular, the diagnostic category of posttraumatic stress disorder that is commonly attached to traumatic experiences in current clinical practice recognizes the truth of individual traumatic events, but at the same time contributes to concealing the political, racial, and historical roots of suffering.

Keywords

diasporic identity, historical consciousness, memory, migration, motherhood, racial discrimination, subaltern