

Ruptures and Their Afterlife: A Cultural Critique of Trauma

Orkideh Behrouzan

This paper provides a cultural critique of the concept of trauma by examining the generational narratives of *toromā* in the Iranian context and the psychologization of memory in the aftermath of the 1980s. It examines memory-work as a cultural and political resource for witnessing and historicizing the otherwise muted discourse of the Iran-Iraq War and the anomaly of the 1980s Iran. The paper elaborates on the concept of rupture, as an alternative to trauma, for its recognition of the complexity, multiplicity, and diffusion of historical conditions and their afterlife. These narratives of rupture show how generations are constructed and

negotiated, not temporally, but based on the political and emotional stakes of *how*, and *what*, one remembers, thereby informing the identity politics of young Iranians and generating new socialities and cultural forms. The paper approaches the psychological afterlife of social anomaly as both a clinical and a cultural/political experience and raises questions about the ethics of engagement with the two constructed concepts of “mental health” and the “Middle East.”

Keywords: mental health, war trauma, rupture, Iran Iraq War, psychiatry, Middle East, memory-work, generational memory

The crisis of representation in/around the Middle East challenges us to re-examine the limits of clinical and anthropological inquiry and to revisit what we mean by “mental health.” What is absent from most debates is an engagement with the fragmented nature of experience as well as the multiplicity of existing pedagogical and cultural discourses across different parts of the region (and within each). In what follows I use an interdisciplinary examination of particular psychological and social experience of youth in post-revolution and post-war Iran as a case study to provide a cultural critique of the concept of “trauma,” its uncritical usage in scholarship and lay discourses, and its contested usefulness in evaluating psychological wellbeing. The broader aim is to revisit prevailing conceptual and methodological assumptions in public health, psychiatry, anthropology, and psychoanalysis.

The conceptual underpinning of this piece stems from the theoretical context explored in my 2016 monograph, *Prozāk Diaries*, which investigates the psychopolitics of wellbeing in Iran and problematizes the translation of complex histories and lived experiences to the universal notion of “trauma” without contextualizing it in its own much-contested historical tra-

jectory in the West.¹ Using anthropological and psychoanalytical frameworks, the book analyzes the generational memories of the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War, the 1980-83 Cultural Revolution, and the political and cultural double-binds of 1980s Iran. It illustrates how self-identified generations such as the “1980s generation” continue to remember, process, and work through cultural and political shifts that quietly inscribed ruptures in their experiences of the self and the world around them. In their *generationally* organized memories and subjectivity-work, I located emerging languages, cultural forms, and generational aesthetics that were acutely

informed by psychiatric and clinical discourses. In their works of art, literature, and/or other cultural productions, online and offline, they refer to some of their experiences as *toromā*, a Persian term hardly translatable to the individual, singular, and universal concept of “trauma” as understood in Western scholarship. The experience of the double binds of ordinary life in 1980s Iran, for example, is not easily translatable to individual *trauma*. Rather, it can be captured in the concept of *rupture*,² which recognizes the complexity, multiplicity, and diffusion of historical conditions and their afterlife. I will elaborate on the concept and share some thoughts on the ethics of engagement

with the two constructs of “mental health” and the “Middle East.”

Iran’s experience provides a reflexive opportunity, primarily because the passage of three decades since the end of the conflict has allowed for the long-term complexities of anomie to come to the surface. Iranians’ experiences of the war itself and its cultural and psychological legacies provide insight and raise timely questions about the afterlife of ruptures across the region in the coming years.

Remembering is Our Gift: The 1980s and its Memories

Thirty years since it ended, the Iran-Iraq war continues to shape Iranians’ sense of the world around them. The longest trench war of the 20th century, officially dubbed “Sacred Defense,” resulted in over one million deaths on both sides. But to reduce the anomie of the 1980s to war experience would be myopic. I have elsewhere shown how the Iran-Iraq War was situated in broader experiences of postrevolutionary anomie and the 1980-83 Cultural Revolution that transformed public life by ideological propaganda, the institutionalization of new gendered and gendering moral order and Islamic codes of dress and conduct, and consequential shifts in cultural policy (Behrouzan Prozak Diaries).

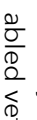
The war and the Cultural Revolution transformed Iranian society by engendering new forms of civilian life, the significant impact of which on children and adolescents has been largely overlooked.

For children of the 1980s, much of collective memory is shaped, depending on their age, by their childhood experience of double-binds and internalized anxieties in the face of not only war conditions, but also contradictory obligations, moral policing, ideological imperatives (in school, educational paradigms, the media, and the public sphere), and significantly, witnessing their parents’ hurried transition into the new era; whether forced or fervently celebrated, in the child’s eye, the transformation of grown-ups’ lifeworlds remained an impenetrable experience (Behrouzan, Prozak Diaries). As sweeping tides drew ideological and culture wars throughout and after the 1980s, the ensuing double-binds were hardly lost on children.

Similarly, even though the physical aspect of the war was contained to border provinces, its experience was extended into the nation’s ordinary life via an omnipresent media campaign, school teachings, higher education policies, and a visible presence of imageries in urban spaces as



well as institutions, not to mention waves of internal displacement. During the so-called “War of Cities,” too, civilians in twenty-seven Iranian cities experienced intense episodes of missile raids, particularly between 1984 and 1987 (Khaji et al.). Even for children who were physically distant from bombing sites, missile attacks, the brutal use of mustard gas and nerve agents on the city of Sardasht, and the reverberations of war propaganda in the media and in educational agendas continue to occupy a central place in their collective adult minds.³ Meanwhile, wartime creation of compensatory structures and identity categories such as *jānbāz* (disabled veteran) had consequences in the postwar era: while providing recognition and care for some veterans and their kin, these labels continue to receive conflicting interpretations. Many veterans returned to society only to experience resentment, neglect, or grief for bygone revolutionary ideals; others might be denied eligibility for compensation (especially as years pass) or are reluctant to claim stigmatized compensatory benefits. Some found themselves ideologically distanced from their children and a society that has fast moved on from wartime values of austerity, stoicism, and egalitarianism toward neoliberalization (Behrouzan, Prozak Diaries).



Significantly, we have failed to incorporate such postwar sociopolitical and cultural transformations in our debates on mental health. These invisible wounds escape the quantitative and diagnostic measurements of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM).⁴ In our evaluation of war casualties, for example, we often rely on statistics of certain psychiatric diagnoses (Behrouzan, “Medicalization as a Way of Life”).⁵ But these statistics need to be interpreted critically with attention to what they cannot reveal: the cultural meanings that shape individuals’ experiences of diagnostic categories and of the standards based on which they are constructed.

In the psychological afterlife of social ruptures, alternative histories of loss are written. These alternative histories and emotional states create cultural forms that outlive wars and social crises. One such cultural form is the creation of generational identities that outlast the crisis and continually inform a society’s sense of wellbeing. I focus on the complexities of these generational forms and on specific internalized memories of childhood that have a persistent presence in young Iranians’ lives, in nightmares, in cultural/artistic expressions, and/or in symptoms of pathology. I examine these childhood

memories against the construct of trauma in order to underscore the limitations of the concept.

Several generational identities have emerged in Iran with exclusive references to the 1980s, creating an emotionally charged identity politics manifest in young Iranians’ use of labels and memorabilia. Persistent self-identification with, and contestation over, labels such as “the 1980s generation,” “Children of the 1980s,” or the “burnt generation,” raises questions about the fluid demarcations of these identities. The label *dahneh-ye shasti-hā*, or “the 1980s generation,” for instance, is claimed by youth of various ages: rivalries exist as to whether the label identifies those who were born in the late 70s and early 80s and thus somewhat remember wartime, those who were born in the late 80s with no immediate experience of the war but identifying with its legacies, or those who were older children in the 80s with vivid memories of its tensions. It is precisely this ambiguity that calls for attention to the affective nature of this identity politics and its relation to a very specific period of anomie. Today’s prominence of these generational identifications in Iranian public discourse urges us to investigate the psychological and political significations of the 1980s.



The 1980s generation has created a particular generational aesthetic around 1980s cultural symbols and material memories (Behrouzan Prozak Diaries). The return of these conflicted pasts can be traced in cultural expressions as well as in *toromāik* nightmares, both of which serve to show how “trauma” as a framework fails to capture the nuances of such deeply wounded contexts and subjective experiences. Recurring dreams are common, “of crashes, airplanes crashing into our house,” and of episodes of fleeing or being stuck. As are hearing screams, sirens, or explosions, “most commonly, loud cries of a big crowd; chaos, chaos” or “waking with a racing heart, sweating, and a feeling of panic.” In these flashbacks the war is only one of the several identifiers of anxiety. Many, across ideological divides, recall anxieties in the face of the morality police, e.g., “being arrested for a loose headscarf,” or “losing my father in the battlefield,” or “memories of mourning ceremonies in school,” or even the more seemingly trivial double-bind of following pious teachings in school while knowing, for instance, that one’s parents’ possession of alcohol or music cassettes at home could have dire consequences. Even though revolutionary tides subsided in the following years and their grip on social liberties loosened, they left their mark on

children’s minds. So did memories of loss and mourning, when collective solidarity and grief for the nation’s martyrs often evoked a deep sense of melancholy and perplexity among children. Sometimes these flashbacks come and go unexpectedly, as one self-identified *dahey-e shasti* put it: “If I think hard, I can remember some of these scenes or sounds in real life, or from television, or from school. The war was always around us. Our generation is who it is today because of growing up during the war.”⁶

The quick transition from “I” to “we” is a common feature in these narratives. Such pluralization helps to ground one’s experience in a shared history and thus give it meaning. Generalizations about *nas/e-mā* (our generation) signify an unspoken know-what about a shared experiential identity. However, they are far from monolithic and are ideologically and socioeconomically diverse, at times even opposing, and yet what unites them is their rootedness in the psychological significations of a particular temporality. It is precisely the shared nature of this *toromā* that should make us resist the temptation to pathologize and reduce these experiences to medicalized artefacts.

These returns and flashbacks create anxiety, helplessness, and at times PTSD-like symptoms. While enacting psychoanalytical notions of repression, displacement, dissociation, and belated retellings, they also convey a historically grounded intuition that shapes people’s sensory perceptions and emotional states. Several generationally recognized references to the 1980s return and reflect the embodied cultural sensibilities of each generation. Such cultural embodiments are not always conscious, but can reveal the historical grounds of distress (Behrouzan Prozak Diaries). Not unlike their cultural productions, this generation’s flashbacks and dreams are filled with cultural references: e.g., war anthems and wartime sirens that still awaken visceral reactions and autonomic reflexes in the body. They are indeed situated in waking life, and traces of them are widely found in rapidly circulating blog and social media posts, YouTube videos, and other creative and cultural expressions.⁷

Significantly, generational recollections mobilize various strategies such as humor and irony as common narrative strategies that not only create new generational vernaculars, but also underscore the culturally generative capacity of so-called *toromātik* memories. This is significant.



The abundance of jokes found on Iranians' 1980s-themed blogs and social media groups reminds us of the dangers of myopic pathologization and the importance of understanding psychological and linguistic processes that individuals mobilize in acts of remembering and meaning-making, especially when the remembered past is rendered absurd. Narrative strategies like humor are significant for their psychological functionality, as is the psychoanalytical notion of dissociation, for example when remembering intense experiences "as if we were not there."

The (cultural) details of experience, too, are important in these recollections. Cultural symbols from the 1980s are increasingly circulated in cultural productions and the media inside and outside of Iran, each demarcating carefully organized generational aesthetics. They include material reminders of wartime austerity and sanctions or the moral policing of the 1980s (e.g., ration coupons, changing school uniforms, or the domestic shampoo brand *Darugar*, the latter holding a special place in *sensoy* memory for its deep yellow color and distinctive smell) as well as sounds (e.g., the siren reminding of missile raids, or religious chants routinely recited in schools). I have elsewhere provided a sensory reading of these evocative objects and material

remains (Behrouzan Prozak Diaries), each provoking a host of feelings, from nostalgia, anxiety, and fear, to a compelling sense of the uncanny: one would not want to go back to the reality of the 1980s, but one cannot resist the pull of nostalgia either.

It is tempting to interpret this persisting memory-work as mere self-indulgent nostalgia; sometimes even such indulgence can itself be ethnographically and psychologically significant. However, through objects and imageries, these mini-generations are also writing alternative histories of a decade of anomie that they perceive as unaccounted for in official discourse.

This urge for keeping alive one's own, marginalized, version of history is at the heart of these recollections. Creating new forms of kinship, this communal memory-work is a call for recognition and accountability. These aspiring "diagnosticians and historians"⁸ performatively engage in memory-work, online and offline, contributing to broader psycho-political processes of recognition for different generational experiences (Behrouzan Prozak Diaries). The politics of this collective, at times contradictory, historicization should not be overlooked: it extends cultural negotiations and contestations over unspoken memory-wounds that are by default ideologi-

cally and politically charged. Remembering, in other words, is intertwined with the politics of voice and legitimation. But this remembering is not merely retrospective. Even though this generational identity politics draws on the 1980s, its generational ethos remains forward-looking and becomes part of the ongoing construction of distinct generational aspirations, hopes, and desires. And in this identity politics, it is the mundane, the ordinary, and the seemingly trivial material relics that speak volumes.

Most compellingly, during the 2009 uprisings in the aftermath of the presidential elections and the emergence of the Green Movement, many members of the "1980s generation," now wearing green wristbands and joining street protests, changed their Facebook profile pictures to the image of the infamous *Darugar* shampoo bottle, a reminder of who they were (children of austere war times, sanctions, and culture wars) and a token of deep solidarity with a new generation of "martyrs" whose lives were taken during the crackdown of the 2009 protests. Even the term "martyr," which until then belonged to the official and state-sanctioned vocabulary of the Iran-Iraq War and thus belonged to a particular generational and political sensibility, was now vehemently recycled by



young Iranians across revolutionary and secular ideological divides, gaining new meanings in reworked wartime anthems and revolutionary songs, online and on the streets. The much-circulated last Facebook status of one of the young martyrs of the 2009 protests summed it up: "To those who are not survived by their wills but by their Facebook pages." The "will" is a reference to the battlefield letters of the Iran-Iraq War's soldiers, heartfelt confessions of faith and last wishes addressed to their loved ones. Now, the Facebook generation that had long faced the accusation of distancing itself from revolutionary ideologies was re-instrumentalizing the semantics of the decade that gave birth to them. It was the 1980s that united them and gave them a sense of what they did (not) want.

The Persianized term *toromā* cannot be assumed to be a direct translation for trauma, even though it is informed by the public psychiatric discourses of the 1990s.⁹ The *toromā* that the 1980s generation refers to is constructed in the intimate space shared by the "I" and the "we." It is hardly locatable in a single traumatic event. It is culturally significant for guiding how generations construct themselves, how history is psychologically imprinted and reconstructed in the collective mind,

and how the language of pathology (i.e., *toromā*) becomes a cultural and political resource. It also becomes a channel through which to interpret and articulate emotions and memories that were perplexing in the child's mind and/or silenced by institutional dogma. Locating pathology in the individual brain (in clinical concepts like *toromā*) and thus seemingly depoliticizing historical experience, these renditions of *toromā* nonetheless create a new generational politics that is committed to justice, while simultaneously endeavoring to work through, and make sense of, the past.

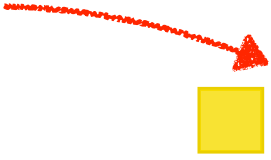
The Afterlife of Ruptures

The paradigm of trauma falls short in capturing generational experiences and memories of the 1980s, partly because it individualizes loss and detaches it from its sociocultural meaning, and partly because it universalizes trauma and takes it for granted, and thus privileges only certain forms of therapeutic intervention. A purely clinical outlook defines (individual) normative stages, demarcates "normal" and "pathological" reactions to an event, and aims to get rid of excessive disturbing memory. This outlook is hardly sufficient when individuals *insist* on remembering and historicizing their collective (or generational) memories of ruptures.¹⁰

To move beyond trauma as a singular, universal, and individual entity requires a conceptual framework that captures the multiplicity and fragmentation of subjective experiences as well as the infusion of psychological ruptures into ordinary life. Iranians' renditions of *toromā* show that this inscription of historical loss into daily life (Das Life and Words; The Act of Witnessing) and the embodiment of its cultural symbols cannot be captured by the universalizing framework that overlooks the creation of new cultural discourses (Kleinman; Kitanaka; Schepers-Hughes; Fischer). Indeed, macro-events such as the war are invoked in people's interpretations of their psychological states. But the long-term infusion of broader losses (of lives, of childhood, of ideals, of moral integrity) into daily life escapes a diagnostic category like PTSD; nor can it be boxed in historical meta-narratives. Regardless, such diagnostic categories continue to guide how professionals and institutions assess psychological wellbeing, even though the diagnosis of PTSD is itself contested for being situated in a specific cultural and ideological history.¹¹

Several scholars have critiqued the globalizing forces of psychiatry that, often in the context of war humanitarianism, universal-





ize or individualize trauma and privilege certain forms of knowledge.¹² However, these critiques are *themselves* situated in their own cultural contexts. Firstly, they risk overlooking both the enormity of psychological pain and the agency with which people may internalize and mobilize diagnostic categories in order to inhabit their experiences of loss. Secondly, they often assume a top-down biomedical apparatus imposing itself on people's interpretations. Iranian public discourses of mental health, however, were not merely the outcome of hegemonic biomedical interventions upon passive recipients, but grew out of a long history of Iranian psychiatry and historical conditions and institutional (medical, psychiatric, and governmental) discourses that were performatively and actively mobilized by people toward specific political and clinical ends (Behrouzan Prozak Diaries). There is little room in prevailing critiques of trauma for such performative mobilization of clinical discourses by ordinary people.

These critiques also risk overlooking the complex ways people pragmatically combine various cultural resources and epistemologies that are far from mutually exclusive. A cultural investigation into the symbolism that underlies Iranians' interpretations shows the importance of under-

standing the historical and emotional trajectories of their affective structures in relation to Shi'ism and mysticism (Good et al.; Fischer, *Iran*; Fischer and Abedi; Beeman), as well as more recent histories of post-revolutionary anomie and double-bind (Behrouzan *Prozak Diaries*). Finally, when problematizing the dominance of "trauma" in mental health discourses, scholarship has hardly provided alternative frameworks that can speak to *both* clinical realities and cultural particularities. This is where anthropological and psychoanalytical listening can complement each other in examining Iranians' generational narratives of past *toromā*, as *these narratives* demand close attention not only to content, but also to modes of sharing and interpretation as well as the intense emotional reactions they evoke. Understanding their cultural symbolism is as important as understanding psychological [coping] mechanisms (Behrouzan, *Prozak Diaries*). Key here is the necessity of a marriage between the psychological and the political; i.e., the recognition of the very real psychological burden of experiences that are nonetheless socio-politically configured.

Psychoanalysis maintains that unrecognized losses could be followed by hyperremembering.¹³ Among young Iranians,

the compulsive revival and mobilization of the 1980s cultural relics facilitates active historicization and witnessing to a decade of *toromā* that "took away" a generation's childhood and to losses for which mourning was largely forbidden. Chief among those losses was the massacre of thousands of political prisoners, an unspoken tragedy that took over two decades to enter public discourse and that contributed to yet further generational formations among the survivors, many of whom were parents to the 1980s children. These contexts are utterly significant. In her *Act of Witnessing*, Veena Das argues that while individual lives are defined by their contexts, "they are also generative of new contexts" (Das: 210). These acts of remembering created dynamic cultural contexts, online and offline, in blogs and works of art, in dreams and waking life, where recursive processes of remembering or forgetting continue to produce new contexts, language forms, and generational sensibilities.¹⁴ This contextualized memory-work reveals the situatedness of *both* trauma and *toromā* in their particular cultural and historical trajectories.

Trauma theories (primarily North American) often assume trauma is an essential, singular, or total event. The influential work of Cathy Caruth (Caruth

Unclaimed Experience), for example, follows Freud in arguing that psychic trauma is not locatable in one's past, but rather "in the way that its very unassimilated nature... returns to haunt the survivor."¹⁵ She maintains that trauma manifests in belated rearticulations of the traumatic event in one's language and actions, in order to work through the incomprehensibility of what was not fully grasped at the time of its occurrence. This delayed narrative, in turn, becomes traumatic; turning into "...a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (Caruth *Unclaimed Experience*: 4). The theory also argues that there is an urge, an "inherent necessity," for belated repetitions of experience that can in turn be further traumatizing. The reconstruction of traumatic memory will thus require a delayed dialogue, with the therapeutic aim of liberating the victim from the silence imposed (on language) by the unspeakability of the experience. There is shared ground here with anthropology's awareness of the impossibility of history as a grand narrative.¹⁶ However, anthropology remains acutely sensitive to the cross-cultural interpretations of this therapeutic encounter and inherent power relations between the so-called victim's voice and the listener.

In my work on listening to the compulsive repetitions of generational memories and the re-traumatizing effect of remembering (particularly in dreams), psychoanalytical frameworks have been extremely helpful. But a solely psychoanalytical focus would have failed in capturing two significant features. The first is the culturally generative capacity of such retellings—i.e., the generational, historical, political, and cultural meanings that individuals assign to their narratives and the cultural and political forms they create out of them. This argument is not a matter of normative judgement, nor is it undermining the psychological burden of experience; rather, it is about recognizing the complexity of a metaphorical grey zone and inhabiting the black and the white at once. Secondly, beyond unconscious repressive mechanisms, Iranians' memory-work was also subject to other forms of inarticulation and silencing in the 1980s and belated articulation since the 1990s (particularly in the virtual space). For them, the psychoanalytical belatedness of articulation was intertwined with the silencing of censorship, culture wars, and intra- and intergenerational politics of legitimation or suspicion (Behrouzan *Prozak Diaries*).

Other psychoanalytical theories of trauma offer commonalities with anthropology

and room for cultural analysis.¹⁷ The Laplanchean and object relations psychoanalytic theories, for example, shift the focus away from the traumatic event and towards processes of remembering and meaning-making (Laplanche and Pontalis). While for Caruth (or Freud) it is the traumatic event that returns and traumatizes and is eventually meant to be re-assimilated and recovered in the analytical process, for Laplanchean and British theories, it is the belated processes of association that render memory traumatic. This approach allows us to situate the experience in the social context in which remembering is enabled, forced, or forbidden. (What happens, for example, when grief endures over time for one whose child was executed in prison but whose death cannot be publicly acknowledged or mourned three decades later?). This approach is thus complementary to anthropological insight into the *context* of traumatic experience and memory-work (Das *The Act of Witnessing; Life and Words*).

Moreover, this approach underscores linguistic and cultural symbolics and therefore the incommensurability of experiences across different factions of a generation. It thus helps to de-universalize trauma, providing another point of com-

plementarity with anthropological scholarship that explores the cultural contexts of mental illness (Kleinman *Culture and Depression*; Kleinman *Illness Narratives*; Good). Finally, by focusing on the interpretations and meanings forwarded by narrators *themselves*, it allows their voices to emerge (in all their complexity and contradictions) within their own cultural grammar and local contexts. This shift of focus to performativity provides a useful conversation with anthropology. And it is in this conceptual conversation that I situate the concept of rupture (as opposed to trauma) for understanding *toromā*. Conceptually, trauma is deemed universal, individual, and singular. Rupture captures the particular, shared, and fluid nature of memory-wounds; it takes our focus away from the external “event” and toward the consequent processes of sharing, remembering, and working through memory-wounds that are otherwise muted by either institutional memory or clinical classifications.

The historically informed modes in which Iranian youth reconstruct experiences of *toromā* underscore political and cultural hermeneutics. *Toromā* is hardly about a single traumatic event; it is scattered across historical occurrences and relays how history is psychologically lived by

infusing itself into the present and the future. Persian vocabularies such as *toromā*, *khoreh-ye ruhi* (psychological canker-like wound), *āsib-e ruhi* (loosely, “psychological damage”), *zarbeh-ye ruhi* (blow to the soul), and *feshār-e ruhi* (distress and pressure on the soul/psyche) emerge within their own psychological grammar (Behrouzan Prozak Diaries). The concept of rupture conveys the diffused nature of these psychological experiences that are rooted in disturbing historical conditions and their aftermath. Ruptures manifest through cultural references, emotional themes, and, significantly, new language forms with which disturbing experiences are performatively internalized and interpreted. Understanding ruptures therefore necessitates understanding the cultural, linguistic, and psychological significations of the historical legacy they belong to.

Trauma is assumed to be experienced by the individual; ruptures, however, are intersubjectively interpreted, negotiated, legitimated, and reconstructed, ultimately informing generational demarcations. Ruptures continually seep into the social mind. Being shared is their condition of possibility. While trauma is assumed to be psychological and pathological, ruptures can be culturally generative, creating new

socialities, communities, language forms, and cultural aesthetics. What differentiates them from a purely pathologized understanding of trauma is also the fact that, while they undoubtedly disrupt life and create psychological pain, they also paradoxically carry the possibility of working through themselves due to the cultural and political forms they can harness. This is additionally significant in terms of their representational ethics: “we are not victims,” young Iranians adamantly remind us.

These generational re-articulations help to anchor oneself in time and distinguish oneself from those who do not share their experience, thus mapping broader social and political discourses that shape one’s subjectivity. As if an attempt to make temporality intelligible as non-linear, incohesive, and eruptive, they make a historical claim toward a decade that marks for them the beginning and the end of times. Anchoring themselves in time is not a matter of chronology or eventfulness (or trauma for that matter); rather, it is about the pull of the evocations, the inner turmoil, projections, transferences, and displacements that a particular moment in their shared past evokes in them and creates a community of avid rememberers.

No word captures the viscerality of ruptures better than the Persian word *khoreh* (canker), the usage of which is situated in a particular literary and historical context.

The idea that ruptured pasts invade the present like a “corrosive wound” or canker is often brought up by Iranians with reference to the oft-quoted words of Sadeq Hedayat in his seminal novella *Blind Owl* (Hedayat: 1). “There are certain wounds in life that, like a canker (*khoreh*), continue to gnaw at the soul and eat it away in solitude.” The word *khoreh* is also an old name for leprosy and is sometimes used to describe the invasive nature of cancer. *Khoreh* is not a scar, but a *zakhm* (open wound); not a lifeless remnant of catastrophe, but a consuming and venomous lesion, evoking Veena Das’s concept of “poisonous knowledge,” i.e., embodied knowledge of the past that cannot be unknown and that descends into one’s present (Das *The Act of Witnessing*). For young Iranians, the poisonous knowledge of the 1980s ruptures are incommensurable across generations; they are diffused, fragmented, unpolished, and incomplete, at times perceived as unacknowledged, unrecognized, and unaccounted for. The growing circulation of their recollections is driven in part by the inherent psychological necessity of retelling, and in part by a dynamic generational voice that feels

compelled to make sense of history and to work through the pains of the past while moving toward the possibilities of the future.

Iranians’ diverse articulations of memory-wounds illustrate that *toromā* turns the seemingly de-politicizing and de-socializing notion of psychological trauma on its head by rendering memories cultural and political resources. Compulsive and collective remembering, online and offline, serves as a historicizing call for justice and accountability, while also re-socializing and re-politicizing the otherwise silenced critical discourse of the Iran-Iraq War and the anomie of the 1980s (Behrouzan *Prozak Diaries*). Narratives of rupture also show how generations are constructed and negotiated, not temporally, but based on the political and emotional stakes of how, and what, one remembers. They inform the identity politics of young Iranians and generate new socialities and cultural forms. The psychological afterlife of social anomie is thus both a clinical and a cultural/political experience; investigating it is therefore situated in a crisis of representation.

Moving Beyond Trauma and Towards New Representational Ethics

That the “Middle East” is increasingly misrepresented and often reduced to studies of conflict or trauma has political and clinical ramifications. Institutional narratives of both politics and public health often gravitate towards binaries of heroism and victimhood, of “trauma” and “resilience.” Lived experiences, however, surpass time and space and reside somewhere in between. The place to locate them is the messy grounds of ordinary life, in unending negotiations and choices that emerge out of the mundane. These experiences are continually interpreted and re-interpreted, escaping total representation. What ethics of engagement does this representational impasse engender?

In 2014, I started the initiative “Beyond Trauma”, a collaborative project for a cultural critique of current mental health discourses in the region. It aims to address problematic assumptions in scholarship, research, policy, and practice, and to seek situated approaches to wellbeing (Behrouzan “Beyond Trauma”). It focuses on the representational assumptions of terms such as “Middle East” and “mental health,” the psychologization and de-politicization of conditions that are rooted in political disorder, the scarcity of interdisci-



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- The initiative underscores the compelling role of diverse cultural practices, historical conditions, moral contexts, and medical pedagogies in shaping psychological wellbeing and the afterlife of social ruptures.
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plinary work due to rigid conceptual and methodological boundaries, and the dominance of specific clinical frameworks in public health debates. It underscores, through collaboration among scholars, policymakers, and practitioners, the diverse ways in which psychological wellbeing is conceptualized across the region and encourages bottom-up qualitative research in historical, cultural, and clinical domains.¹⁸

Commonly, "mental health" in the region is evaluated in terms of individual diagnoses such as PTSD. Such an isolated clinical outlook reduces psychological wellbeing to the absence of mental illness, obscuring the sociopolitical reality of ruptures, and reifying social memory into a clinical symptom that ought to be cured and cleansed. It pathologizes memory at the expense of other various aspects of experience that not only generate new forms of life and cultural prospects, but that can also lead to new therapeutic potentials. The point here is not to undermine the burden of the pathological, but to better understand it by situating it in its broader political context and to challenge a black-and-white representation of pathology itself.

Scholarship and practice of mental health primarily focus on the individual and the inner pain; social sciences and humanities underscore the outer, the sociopolitical, the collective. In a nuanced investigation of psychological wellbeing, neither focus should come at the expense of the other. Combining clinical and cultural sensibilities can enhance both inquiries. This requires understanding the variety of available cultural and/or clinical resources, in each cultural context, for creating a meaningful life.

laborative, and comparative work across different parts of the region, and a serious engagement between arts and humanities, social sciences, and psychiatry and psychological sciences (Behrouzan "Beyond Trauma").

Of course, the psychiatric medicalization of social anomie has already been the subject of critical analyses in various disciplines, including medical anthropology.¹⁹ But such critique has yet to grow in relation to Middle East Studies. "Beyond Trauma" aims to place Middle East Studies in a conceptual and methodological conversation with critical studies of science, health, and medicine in order to explore historical, cultural and clinical conceptualizations of psychological wellbeing. Part of this endeavor is to critically examine theories of trauma that are uncritically adapted in Middle Eastern contexts, to revisit disciplinary assumptions, and to interrogate the ethical and political stakes of mental health care research, practice, and policy in the region. This requires multi-sited, collaborative, and comparative work across different parts of the region, and a serious engagement between arts and humanities, social sciences, and psychiatry and psychological sciences (Behrouzan "Beyond Trauma").

A culturally situated critique of the construct of mental health necessitates an interdisciplinary exploration of cultural forms, historical trajectories, psychoanalytical insights, localized psychiatric and psychological knowledge, local pedagogies, and globalized knowledge-forms including neuroscience and epigenetics. It also requires a commitment to justice, recognition of moral complexities, and innovation (in both research and practice) in the face of uncertainty and precarity. The first step is to listen intimately and with ears stripped of disciplinary assumptions. I hope the conceptual implications of my work on narratives of *toromā* will prove useful beyond Iran, and that they will be complemented—or challenged—by contributions from other parts of the region.

Notes

¹The following sections of this paper are specifically informed by the findings of the larger project discussed in *Prozak Dairies* (Behrouzan), particularly chapters 4, 5, and 6, support for which is acknowledged in the book.

² See Behrouzan's *Prozak Dairies*, chapter 5.

³ See Behrouzan's *Medicalization as a Way of Life* for an analysis of relational PTSD, and *Prozak Dairies*, Chapters 4, 5, and 6 for a detailed analysis of how life was transformed during the 1980s from the perspective of children and adolescents.

⁴ Elsewhere, I have discussed normative debates on postwar mental health that focus on clinical measurements of veterans' and civilians' individual trauma, and have argued that the psychological ramifications of social and political ruptures include, but cannot be reduced to, clinical symptoms (Behrouzan "Medicalization as a Way of Life"; *Prozak Dairies*).

⁵ Existing estimations and mortality reports for the Iran-Iraq War, for instance, are constantly contested and vary across sources.

Murray and Woods; Chubin and Tripp; Khoury provide insightful historical overviews. Iran's Martyrs Organization reports the existence of over 550,000 *jānbāz* (war-disabled veterans) and over 42,000 former prisoners of war in Iran, 120,000 of whom being chemically injured veterans, 43,000 documented *jānbāze-ā-sāb va ravān* (psychologically inflicted veterans), and 7,200 veterans with serious psychiatric disorders, and a growing number of immediate kin experiencing the psychological symptoms of depression and anxiety.

For more, see Behrouzan, *Prozak Dairies*, chapter 6.

⁶ For more on *toromatik* dreams, see Behrouzan and Fischer; Behrouzan, *Prozak Dairies*.

⁸ For a detailed analysis of these reconstructions of memory in the Iranian blogosphere or *Weblogestan*, see Behrouzan's *Prozak Dairies*, Chapter 5.

⁹ See Behrouzan's *Prozak Dairies*, Chapter 4

¹⁰ See chapter 4 of Behrouzan's *Prozak Dairies* on top-down mental health awareness campaigns of the 1980s as well as the bottom-up and performative emergence of psychiatric subjectivities among youth since the 1990s.

¹¹ This section is informed by a detailed discussion of trauma theories in Behrouzan, *Prozak Dairies*, Chapter 5.

¹² See Young's historical analysis of the political economy and ideological contexts within which PTSD was constructed in the aftermath of World War II and the Vietnam War (Young). Also see Fassin and Rechtman for a historical trajectory of 'trauma discourses and their limitations: On the paradigm of PTSD in psychiatry, see Rechtman.

¹³ See Summerfield for his critique of international organizations offering programs for "posttraumatic stress" in war zones; Fassin and Rechtman too provide a Foucauldian analysis of how trauma victims, certain modes of truth production, and constructions of individual trauma emerged (Fassin and Rechtman).

¹⁴ For more on hyper-remembering, see Clewell.

¹⁵ For a detailed discussion of scholarship on memory, see the conclusion of Chapter 5 in Behrouzan's *Prozak Dairies*.

¹⁶ Caruth's work relies on re-readings of Freud, whose earlier work defines the traumatic event as external while his later work focused on a theory of trauma as the origin of consciousness. Lacanians, on the other hand, approach recollection in terms of the impossibility of responding to the destruction caused by the traumatic experience (Laplanche and Pontalis). Also see endnote 15.

¹⁷ See Crapanzano; Fischer, "Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory"

¹⁸ In Chapter 5 of *Prozak Dairies* I have discussed the trajectory of prevailing American trauma theories based on the clinical experiences of the survivors of traumatic memories, the establishment of PTSD in the DSM, as well as connections with the neuroscience of memory (Radstone; Vander Kolk; Kolk et al.). In this school of thought, the ungrasped traumatic event ought to be re-integrated into the consciousness by way of the analytical process. French (Laplanche theories based on formulations of Laplanche and Pontalis) and British (object relations) schools of psychoanalysis have challenged this approach by underscoring the unconscious processes of producing associations with traumatic memory (Radstone). They call for attention to culturally shaped spaces of mediation between the narrator and the witness/therapist.

¹⁹ See the 2015 Special Issue in *Medicine Anthropology Theory* (MAT), published after the first Beyond Trauma Workshop: <http://www.medanththeory.org/issue/vol-2-3/>.

→ ²⁰ See Footnotes 13 and 14.

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