ELLIS ISLAND: STORIES OF TRAUMA AND IMMIGRATION

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Structured around the space of Ellis Island as organizing metaphor, the study focuses on the testimonies of the immigrants coming mainly from southern and eastern Europe, gathered in "Island of Hope, Island of Tears" by David M. Brownstone, Irene M. Franck and Douglass Brownstone. A tribute to the 18 million people who made their journey from the Old to the New World between 1890 and 1920 in the largest migration in the recent history of mankind, the book is the story of many stories about humiliation, pain and despair suffered in the name of hope. In exploring the complex relations established between personal testimony - political context and fiction -nonfiction, I investigate the extent to which Ellis Island, as the last but one point of destination of an epic journey to America can be analyzed as a traumatic/traumatizing cultural landscape.

Key words: trauma, immigration, identity, sea journey, Ellis Island

A tribute to the 18 million people who made their journey from the Old to the New World between 1890 and 1920 in the largest migration in the recent history of mankind, the book "Island of Hope, Island of Tears" by David M. Brownstone, Irene M. Franck and Douglass Brownstone is a collection of stories about, pain and despair suffered in the name of hope. The stories of trauma and survival of the immigrants to the United States coming from places like Armenia, Russia, Poland and Ukraine make up an emotional representation of the process of immigration and of Ellis Island. In their naratives, the Central, Southern and Eastern European immigrants depicted their living conditions, their anxiety and despair, their hopes and aspirations. These unique documents give voice to individual men and women who took part in a singular experiment in American history, the "great immigration" to the United States.

My study analyzes these stories as stories of trauma and suffering, revolving around a trauma engendered by the anticipation of deportation and the dismemberment of the family, events which destabilize the narrative continuity of the immigrant's identity. My intention to construe the experience of immigration as a multiple stage process made up of traumatic events is in no way attempt to minimize large-scale traumas such as genocide but it does, however, suggest the necessity to reinvestigate the meaning of "trauma", together with the forms in which trauma manifests itself , of the events likely to trigger trauma and of the sense of disruption, materialized in the split into "before "and "after" as a reference point in these narratives of trauma and migration. The study investigates the way in which the immigrants construct and reconstruct their life story as a result of the traumatic rupture and whether their confessional narratives functions as a strategy way of creating continuity meant to replace the sense of rupture and destruction

The study aims focuses on private experiences of immigration, which upon their exposure through writing, become politically revealing and indicative of a collective trauma transmitted through innumerable individual representations of suffering. Apart from being stories with immense emotional investment, such texts of trauma also bear witness to a complex political, social and economic context and this study aims to decipher the extent to which such

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contextual aspects determine the trauma and contribute to the construction of a migrant identity, emerging at the intersection of self-centered realities (personal loss, departure from familiar places, physical abuse and deprivation, starvation, nausea) and politically dependent factors, such as the passage of immigration-related legislation, the rise of the Eugenic movement and the American nativist rhetoric and the mechanism of social coercion enforced at Ellis Island. Out of the desire to provide a balanced cultural representation of the immigration trauma, and of the awareness that any cultural representation emerges as a result of a battle over codification and appropriating traumatic events through discourse, this analysis will focus not only on the immigrants' stories, but also on the voices of the officials having worked at Ellis Island in the first three decades of the 20th century. Their stories of suffering and witnessing will be analyzed as politically-charged texts that challenge concepts and structures of power, as they bring into play highly personal visions of Ellis Island, sometimes questioning the legitimacy of the political regulations and in many ways exposing the inconsistency of a structure that promises security and safety but produces instead abuses and coercion. The description of Ellis Island becomes the result of a continual process of negotiation between individual trauma and collective trauma, between the representation of the traumatic event by an individual and by a group of immigrants and officials.

Moreover, as we fear universally applicable and "normative "models, this study does not claim to offer access into the only possible story of immigration to America. This inquiry deploys fragmented memories and testimonies from a limited number of people and presents a possible story derived from encapsulated memories that cannot be perfect records of actual historical events, but merely revisions, restructured memories that may attempt only to document the historical event in an authentic yet limited manner. Nor do we want to describe Ellis Island as a place of infamy and sorrow, as we are aware of the fact that more than three quarters of all the immigrants reaching the portals were given the right to become American citizens and they are the ones likely to remember Ellis Island as the "Island of hope". In this study, rather than being attached a positive or negative connotation, Ellis Island will be described as a liminal point, a point of separation between America and non-America, a space of inspection, observation, surveillance and detention.

A conceptual framework for trauma

The past decade has evinced an unprecedented commitment to literature and theories of trauma and the emergence of groundbreaking work in the area of medicine, psychology, literature, critical theory and cultural studies. Despite the huge amount of trauma scholarship in the past decades, or perhaps, because of it, trauma has become an increasingly vexed term, loosely used by theorists as a metaphor for modern life and understood as a "a strategic fiction that a complex, stressful society is using to account for a world that seems threateningly out of control"(Farrell 22). According to such theories, the articulation of trauma transcends its diagnostic and therapeutic dimension by assuming a specific hermeneutic function meant to generate a narrative. Derrida points out to the intermingling rhetoric of literature and medicine and describes the "written text as pharmakon, a medicine acting as remedy and poison, simultaneously beneficent or maleficent"(Derrida 70). But this medical analogy can go as far as Rousseau who suggests that the study of literature and medicine can teach how to read patients as well as other texts more accurately, and can lead to a better understanding of how language,

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rhetoric and literature interacts with facts of life. Or even to Plato who in the "Phaedrus" has Socrates suggest that "rhetoric is like medicine" and as medicine treats the body, rhetoric can cure soul.

In the area of immigration literature, few critics deploy the term "trauma", and even fewer contextualize precisely the implication of trauma in the process of displacement and removal entailed by immigration. The problematic dimension of the literary engagement lies in the impossibility to reconcile the Enlightenment discourse of the person as an autonomous, rational agent with a unique core of memories and desires with postmodernist theories of trauma which emphasize the fragmentation of the self into parts not available to consciousness or memory and the inability to dissociate between real and feigned memories. Hence, the failure to investigate this traumatic experience which numbs, unsettles, causes anxiety, shatters trust, undermines one's sense of security and determines feelings of powerlessness and frustrates any analytical attempts at deciphering it. As it is impossible to harmonize the two apparently conflicting discourses within the framework of traditional academic disciplines, this study will focus on some interdisciplinary approaches from critical theory, psychology and anthropology. Throughout this study, my use of the term "trauma" is indebted to the definitions of trauma created first by Freud and Joseph Breuer, and more recently by Caruth and Felman. In identifying the various instances of trauma and trauma-engendering circumstances, the term will be conceptualized as a particular structure of experience and reception, elusive in physical and psychological manifestations, which engenders deep-seated and uncontrollable consequences in the personal life of the person experiencing it. Though not necessarily produced by a catastrophe, the memory of the event to bring about trauma is so intimately lived and relived that it achieves a haunting power. Traumatic events are unbearable in their abhorrence and emotional intensity and although fully experienced, they are impossible to conceptualize. The event manifests itself in various guises with different implications for each person, as an event contextualized in different frameworks, which baffles and surpasses language; an event predictable and anticipatable with unpredictable and impossible to anticipate results; a thing that tantalizes our resourcefulness in understanding and naming it. Going through trauma is equivalent to self-imposed seclusion and isolation and traumatic events become meaningful only when shared with others, in the act of bonding with others, while talking and being listened to. The representation of trauma lies at the conjunction of emotion, memory and transmission through language. When transmitting the traumatic through narrative, an emotional distance is necessary in order to transmit it without re-enacting trauma(Caruth 95) and due to this sense of detachment imposed by temporal and emotional distance, the "accuracy" of memories is doubtful, and there emerges a "crisis of truth" because of the impossibility of the subject to fully process the event.

Leaving Europe

Towards the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century, the "new immigrants" from Italy, Russia, Poland, Hungary, Serbia, Slovakia, Greece, Romania, and Armenia started to pour in the United States in large numbers. During the Depression period, this new wave of immigration plummeted in the mid 1890 in America, then soared in the first decade of the 20th century, was interrupted by World War I and picked up again between 1919 and 1922.

The immigrants were leaving Europe, the land of czars, kings, emperors and sultans; the space of autocratic empires, of countries which had just won their independence from the Ottoman Empire such as Bulgaria and Romania or partitioned countries beaming with nationalist

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uprising like Poland. They were leaving a Europe of wars, border fights, punitive raids, revolts and uprisings. A Europe devastated by the war, in which young men had been conscripted, many of them had died in battle or prison camps and where civilians had starved, suffered from cold and disease. Most of the people fled Europe which condemned them to a life sentence of poverty and were attracted to the promise of open-ended possibilities which golden America seemed to deliver. But for the Russians Jews fleeing the pogroms and the Armenians fearing the holocaust at the hands of the Turks, America was appealing not because it offered them more opportunities but a chance to life. Many Europeans were bringing with them memories and traumatic experiences stemming from the political upheaval in their countries. With very few mementos of their former life packed in a pouch hung around the neck, the immigrants started their journey onto a wagon or train with the overland trip which could take weeks and ended at port cities.

The Eugenic gaze and the passing of restrictive immigrant legislation

Until 1875, there were no restriction clauses in the U.S. immigration laws but as the Jews and the Irish became more noticeable due to their coming in larger numbers, the Protestants began to look into possible ways to exclude them. By the mid-1890s the United States sought to decrease the number of immigrants and started the implementation of more restrictive inspection rules: steamship lines had to query the immigrants in many ways and attest to the detailed information on their manifests; immigration inspectors at Ellis Island checked for accuracy of the information given in response to their questions by comparing it with the information on the manifests. If the answers differed, the immigrant was referred to a Board of Special Inquiry, which tried to determine the truth. Such interviews were hardly ever conducted according to constitutional guarantees of civil liberties, as the immigrants were not allowed attorneys, or to confer with American friends or relatives.

The dawns of the 20th century brought along powerful anti-immigration feelings, a firmer pro-American stance and a tilt toward homogeneity. The newcomers from Central and Eastern Europe were derogatively referred to as “greenhorns” and were seen as representative of different and inferior nations. In the first decade of the 20th century, the passage of laws meant to restrict their numbers became a desideratum of American policy intent on protecting “the American way of life”.

These political ideas were undoubtedly informed by the eugenic movement, a trend started in the late 19th century by Francis Galton, a statistician and cousin of Charles Darwin. Galton’s theory drew heavily on Darwin’s *The Descent of Man* which pointed that humans can “escape the controls generally imposed by natural selection” and that weak members of civilized societies are allowed to “propagate their kind”(Degler 42) and on the findings of European criminal anthropologists who in the late 19th century researched the hereditary origins of crime and urged for policy changes meant to assure society’s enhancement of its moral standards. The eugenics took Herbert Spencer’s social Darwinism to a higher level and advocated social engineering. Criminals, lower-class populations and immigrants became the targets of those intent on demonstrating that heredity was inextricably linked to disease and immorality in the U.S. As this ideological movement capitalizing on racial and ethnic stereotyping was sweeping across the United States, more voices complained about the "mongrelizing" effect which the new immigration had on American society(Guzda 6) . In the first three decades of the twentieth century, as the interest in eugenics and the impetus to limit immigration was at their most

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intense, the U.S. nativist discourse became was inflated with images of deformity, disease and deviancy. If the 1891 immigration statutes excluded from admission to the country "idiots, insane persons, paupers[…] persons suffering from a loathsome or dangerous contagious disease"(26 stat 1084), in 1917, the wording of the statute was preserved intact, but a specific emphasis was added to the category of the "mentally defective".

> …idiots, imbeciles; feeble-minded persons, epileptics, insane persons; persons who have had one or more attacks of insanity at any time previously; [and] persons of constitutional psychopathetic inferiority."(39 stat 875-78)

But American officials feared not only contagious diseases or mental deficiencies. Among the substantial reasons which led to the exclusion of immigrants was illiteracy (which became after 1917 a mandatory cause for exclusion), criminal record of any kind, the likelihood of becoming a public charge and the possibility of being imported for white slavery. The enforcement of such criteria led to many healthy and well-educated women being denied admittance into the U.S. if unaccompanied.

In 1921, America instituted a quote system, with the quota set at three percent a year for each nationality as represented in the 1910 census. Apart from limiting immigration, the "three percent law" set higher norms of paper identification. In 1924, the U.S. passed even more restrictive immigration legislation, lowering the quota at two percent of the number of foreign-born people living in the U.S. Before 1890, most of the immigrants were from Northern and Western Europe, this new law was clearly biased against the new immigrants. Under the 1921 laws, the newcomers could account for about half of the year's quota, while under the 1924 law, they could make up a little more than ten percent of the total. The political strategy emerging at the intersection of such political regulation promoted race superiority and constructed homogeneity and is indicative of vehemently asserted romanticized notions of American history and identity. The two main vectors of immigration law-national origins quotas and racial prerequisites-structured and imposed the image of America as a homogeneous nation with clearly enforced hierarchical principles. The quota laws made immigration dependent on the racial composition of the past as it was imagined and defined by census-takers and legislators while racial prerequisite laws established race as an eligibility criterion for citizenship. By setting the values of conformity to white American values and ideals as the premise of citizenship, such laws not only controlled the composition of American population, but also created a national framework in which the American collective identity was imagined, negotiated and substantiated through myths of white supremacy and Northern European dominance.

The sea journey

The immigrants starting their journeys to the Promised Land were, in their overwhelming majority, too poor to afford a first or second class ticket. Most "greenhorns" would travel in steerage, in the place near the ship's steering equipment, in the below–deck compartment of a ship. Depending on the period, the steerage fare to cross the Atlantic was between $10 and $35. The space strikingly remembered an upper cargo hold, as it had no portholes or effective ventilating mechanisms. Packed together in the steerage compartments, the immigrants endured filth, poor sanitation and disease. Men and women stayed in this unpartitioned space, sometimes separated by nothing but a few blankets in the middle. During the sea journey, trapped in an

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encapsulated space and fused together by a common confrontation with the unknown, starvation, nausea and vomiting, the immigrants bonded with each other in a desperate attempt to cope with the sordidness of their existence.

> But in those days ships were built like traps. You know, you go down the steps, there is a little cabin just fit for two, one on top of the other, and boy, you could never get out if something happened.[…] we had a storm coming over. Then you feel trapped. They close up everything. You can't go out on the deck. But I didn't get seasick.(Brownstone, Franck 131)

Inadequate toilet facilities, nauseating smells, monotonous food contributed to people getting sick and staying so for weeks. In this space, the borders public-private were not clearly delineated and even the most private gestures had to take place in the public area. The forced exposure brought about embarrassment, humiliation and disease.

> The toilet was in the floor, like an open sewer. We just went like dogs and that was the toilet! I could not go there. Everybody, men and women, were doing just that and you see them in this room. I just could not go in a bathroom like that, and it started to work on me and I started to be sick there."(Brownstone, Franck 109)

Ellis Island

When opened in January, the immigration station on Ellis Island was a large two-story wooden building, with a baggage handling area on the first floor and processing handling and inspection area on the second floor. The entire installation included not only railroad ticket offices, money exchange counters and food stands but also a dormitory and a hospital for the detainees. During its peak time, it could handle 10,000 immigrants a day. The second floor held the Great Hall, a room 200 feet by 100 feet with the registration and medical examination facilities. The mezzanine floor-an authentic surveillance area was taken by observation area and administrative office.

The United States greeted its rich immigrants wholeheartedly, but made the poorer ones await their scrutiny as they were ferried to the Ellis Island for inspection. First and second class passengers were usually spared from rigorous inspection and often cleared on board ship. Many times a family would spend most of their savings on a second class ticket for one sick person with the rest of the family travelling in steerage.

In this panopticon-like space, the immigrants went up a long stairway to the main reception point, the Great Hall. In front of them lay a labyrinth of bars, walkways and gates guarded by uniformed guards and inspectors. The bars were intended to create aisles and regulated movement within the building, yet they also strikingly resembled the iron bars of a prison, which delineated detention areas. In this space, characters are under scrutiny, under the constant eugenics gaze. It is a witnessing, a watching and threatening gaze which functions in binary divisions and oppositions such as normal/abnormal, dangerous/harmless.

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> […]we came here to castle garden, and we had those, what you call it, guards. It was just like a prison. They threw us around. […] they would say: "stay here. Stay there". And you live through it, you just don't fight back .(Brownstone, Franck 168)

The medical examination at Ellis Island was conducted according to a system of maximum efficiency. The inspection was performed by two doctors working in pair. The immigrants, coming in single file, kept a space of ten to fifteen feet between and were examined by the first doctors. The second doctor, placed thirty feet from the first, relegated his examination to defects not looked for by the first doctor. The file of immigrants made a right-angle turn just as it reached the second doctor and this enabled the doctor to observe the side and back of the passenger at a glance. The medical check-up lasted two minutes per person and included a brief examination of hands, face and throat. At the end of the examining aisle there waited another team of doctors, who turned the immigrants' eyelids inside out to check for trachoma- a frightening and rather painful stage. Chalk letters put on an immigrant's clothes stood for detention and possible deportation. The letter T signified suspected trachoma, H represented a possible heart condition, and LCD was the abbreviation of "loathsome contagious disease". The abnormalities and diseases likely to determine the exclusion of an immigrant were poor eyesight, partial blindness, senility, lameness, deafness, general weakness and physical deformity, trachoma (a form of conjunctivitis that causes blindness), favus (a scalp disease) and tuberculosis.

> Then came the great moment when we stood in front of the immigration official, who was a doctor, who examined us for venereal diseases, that particular person would not be allowed on the land. There again I had my peculiar feeling of the strange separation-that venereal diseases among first-and second-class passengers was apparently acceptable and for third-class passengers venereal diseases were not. (Brownstone, Franck 163)

After passing through the medical examination, the first question asked by the immigration inspector was "What is your name?" The immigrants who wanted their names changed in America responded with a shortened or Americanized version of their own name. Others had their name changed because the ship's officer had filled out the manifest carelessly and they were too afraid of consequences to object to this. Other illiterate immigrants (the literacy law was introduced in 1917) could hardly make any distinction between the two spelling versions of the same word. Irrespective of the case, the beginning of the interaction immigration officer-immigrant re-inscribes this dialogue about personal details into a story of fear and anxiety. The immigration inspector, helped by an interpreter would review the ship's manifest, a list with the basic information about each passenger focusing on identification, marital status, personal history, financial status and prospective employment. From general to particular, the questions covered precise elements related to their nationality, race, last residence, the seaport of landing in the United States, the final destination and financial status. The inspectors inquired whether the alien had paid his own passage, or whether it had been paid by any other person or by any corporation, society, municipality, or government, and if so, by whom, whether in

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possession of thirty dollars, and if less, how much. They were also interested to know whether the immigrant had ever been in prison, in an institution or hospital for the care and treatment of the insane or supported by charity; whether he was a polygamist or an anarchist.

Most of the immigrants passed the inspection successfully, some were detained in medical units and few were deported, sent back at the expense of the shipping companies having brought them to America. When neither cleared nor deported, they were kept in detention centers and moved into special areas, such as dormitories, bathhouses (for disinfection and delousing) and hospitals. For medical procedures related to showering and fumigation, they had to renounce the few clothing items which they had on them, another step in the process of being depersonalized through the obliteration of culture, class and geographic distinctions.

> ….the worst thing was, you wouldn't guess! Every morning they came around to delouse us. You know what that means? Our things were taken off, we were naked to be deloused. We didn't have a bath or anything. All they know how to do was delouse us, you should excuse me. They took all our clothes, nice dresses, and made rags out of them. As soon as we entered America we had to put them into the garbage. (Brownstone, Franck 168)

Physical abuse was sometimes part of normal routine, a way in which power was strictly enforced by overzealous immigration officers. The result of duch physical abuse was not only humiliation but also emotional scarring or permanent mental trauma.

> One case haunted me for years. A young girl in her teens from the mountains of northern Italy turned up at Ellis Island. No one understood her particular dialect very well, and because of her hesitancy in replying to questions she did not understand, she was sent to the hospital for observation. I could imagine the effect on this girl, who had always been carefully sheltered and had never been permitted to be in the company of a man alone, when a doctor suddenly rapped her on her knees, looked her into her eyes, turned her on her back and tickled her spine to ascertain reflexes. The child rebelled-and how! it was the cruelest case I ever witnessed on the Island. In two weeks' time that child was a raving maniac, although she had been sound and normal when she arrived at Ellis Island. (Brownstone, Franck 221)

The inspections at Ellis Island decided the destiny of the immigrant and the rejection of a family member had far-reaching consequences for the fate of the entire family. That member could be deported by himself, thus breaking up the family forever at Ellis Island or he/she could be accompanied by the rest of the family, which was forced to forsake the American dream forever. An 11-year old who was found to be too sick, or somehow ineligible to enter the U.S. would get sent back with one parent. 12 years old was the cutoff age for determining if someone was a child or not and a child that age could be deported alone, while his parents were sent onwards to their place of destination.

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> The only thing that my mother had trouble with her eyes. You see, my sister took sick on the way-she had some kind of childhood sickness, measles or something. My mother was very concerned and here we were on the boat. She said" I left Europe with five children, I promised your father five children, and I am going to bring him five children!" She was only worried that my sister would die. You know, you get into such a depressive mood. She was very worried, so every night she would sit and cry. My sister got better on the boat, but when we got off, my mother's eyes were very red from crying. (Brownstone , Franck 207)

Single women arriving on Ellis Island were subject to intense discrimination and suspected of having been imported for prostitution. They had to be met either by their future husbands in person and legally wed before admitted to the U.S. or by a family member. If neither married nor met by family members, young women were often sent back home. Unaccompanied pregnant women found it especially difficult to be admitted to the country, as they are likely to be considered typical "public charge" cases. In her description of pregnant women, Helen Barth, an Ellis Island official working for the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society focuses on a national prototype, with little attention to particular details, but with a strong tendency to exoticize the non-American, to believe in the alien quality of the migrants and to conceptualize pregnancy as a marker of negative distinction.

> When a woman was pregnant, for some reason she always had disheveled hair. We all wore hair neat in those days, with braids, you know, and very carefully done. But these little women –their hair seemed more what they look today, cut short and very pale and very dirty. They knew there was something wrong with those women. (Brownstone, Franck 157)

The high stake associated with a successful result determined immigrants to become resourceful in recreating and re-inventing themselves. Illiterate immigrants would recite prayers in their native tongue when asked to read in their own language by the American official.

> When the inspector asked her to read from an Armenian book, she put her finger on the page and recited the Lord's Prayer. He asked her to read again, and again she recited "Our father, who art in heaven …" in Armenian. (Brownstone , Franck 167)

Others lied about having good "job prospects", carefully avoiding the term "contract laborer"-as this might have been a reason for deportation, yet hinting at their job skills in order not to be rejected on "public charge" grounds. In coping with the ambiguity of a law, the immigrants had to develop the right discursive strategies to present their labor skills while at the same time avoiding exclusion.

> It is a puzzling fact that one provision of the Immigration law excludes any immigrant who has no job and classifies him as likely to become a public charge, while another provision excludes an immigrant if he has a job! Common sense suggested that any immigrant who came into the United States in those days to settle here permanently surely came here to work. (Brownstone, Franck 220)

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The interpretation of statistics on the inclusion/exclusion /detention of immigrants will always be subjected to the biases of the person making the interpretation. Whereas some may point out that 80 out of 100 immigrants passed through Ellis Island easily and without experiencing major inconveniences, some prefer to focus on the 20 out of 100 who were held for shorter or longer periods in wire cages visible to other immigrants, in poorly ventilate and crammed detention quarters. When conceptualized by the official agencies which implement laws and statutes, immigration accounts for medicalization, systematization, and policing of human bodies. Inevitably, this strategy of rationalization entails the objectification of human identities, turning identity into mere strings of family names, columns of figures in larger statistics of geographic histories. For the displaced persons, the increased efficiency of immigration procedures articulates chaos and disorder, irrationality and namelessness in a universe in which they become the powerless witnesses of their own destiny played in front of them.

Conclusion

But this study is not one about statistics; it is one about trauma expiated through storytelling, in a reconstitutive act in which past memories are restructured and exorcised in a form of individual and collective healing. It is a brief analysis of disparate stories forming the biography of a collective trauma as a profound experience which facilitates the creation of a new breach in experience and opens up new modes of understanding. It has attempted to re-inscribe Ellis Island in a different conceptual paradigm, by rethinking the clichéd trope of the Ellis Island as a space of liberty or symbol of fulfillment and re-imagining it as a space which illustrates the contradictions of immigration arising out of painful experiences and idealistic thinking, tormenting realities and mute longings.The act of reminiscing about Ellis Island becomes a transformative experience, one that occasions a redefinition of oneself in the new land and of family relations in a new community. The tribulations of late- nineteenth and early-twentieth-century immigration have been largely forgotten amid recent celebrations of assimilation, adaptation, and multiculturalism. Despite the growing popularity of ethnic fiction nowadays, readers and publishers alike pledge allegiance to messages of incorporation, assimilation and redemption and tend to lose sight of the fact that such readings appropriate and simplify the concept of immigration while leaving unchallenged the national fantasy of immigration as a painless and effortless process. If rethinking the effects of immigration on those who experience it turns this study into an attempt to reevaluate the core concepts of the American identity as a nation of immigrants, then the description of the immigration process as a traumatic event is a formula by means of which we can begin to attend to the complexity, ambiguity and obliterated meanings of an American multiculturalism structured around forgotten disruptions, downplayed suffering and unacknowledged losses.

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