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Trauma and Transcendence

Suffering and the Limits of Theory

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Afterword by Mary-Jane Rubenstein

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trauma narratives preserved in Christian theology were constructed and first preserved in the texts of the ancient Hebrew religion and are now preserved in both Jewish and Christian theology.

50. Examples of contemporary theology taking up this task can be seen in the discussion of both liberation theology and womanist and feminist treatments of sexual violence articulated earlier in this chapter.

51. I mean *witness* in the theological sense of *bearing witness*. This does not suggest that a person is able to observe the trauma incurred by those whose narratives are preserved in the text.

AFTERWORD

The Transcendence of Trauma: Prospects for the Continental Philosophy of Religion

Mary-Jane Rubenstein

About a week before the 2016 election, in the midst of what felt like an endless discursive bombardment but now seems a serene prelude to the furious unbridling of white supremacy, sexual violence, and “Christian” nationalism in its immediate aftermath, I spent one Sunday morning—I’ll admit it—in a yoga class. As I made my way through the scented candles and inspirational tank tops on the way out of the studio, a woman caught my eye and asked if I had had a good practice. I answered affirmatively and asked the same of her, to which she replied, “Yes—a lot better than I’d thought. It was hard for me to come today. I have PTSD.”

Hearing such a straightforward articulation of that which presumably defies articulation, I became—quite awkwardly—speechless. Dumbstruck amid the salt lamps and the mantra bracelets. And indeed, theoretically speaking, silence might have been an appropriate response to such a saying of the unsayable. Socially, however, the situation clearly demanded that I speak; after all, the trauma in question was clearly not unsayable from the survivor’s perspective. But neither was it simply communicable: Even after the direct revelation, I was left ignorant of the particular violence that had caused the trauma, so I had no way to translate or sympathize with it.
"PTSD" served at once as a direct and an empty signifier; upon hearing it, I suddenly knew both too much and not enough to respond, which I eventually both did and didn't do by whispering something equally direct and empty like, "Oh, I am so sorry."

"Thanks," she answered. "It's okay." But of course it wasn't.

This volume thinks collectively from and of the irreducible yet entangled duplicity of trauma studies. As Vincenzo Di Nicola argues and as many of the other contributors demonstrate, such duplicities emerge in many different forms and at many different levels: between the individual and the communal, the mimetic and the anti-mimetic, the asemic and the polysemic, the individualizing and the desubjectifying, the disordered and the tropological. And although each of these pairs could give rise to unique explorations of trauma's duplicity, this particular volume tends to assemble them under the meta-distinction between the sayable and the unsayable—in other words, between medicalized, militarized, and empirical studies of trauma on the one hand (for example, "I have PTSD") and cultural, philosophical, and psychoanalytic approaches on the other (for example, trauma as absolute rupture, as the presence of an absence, as the possibility of the impossible).

Of these two approaches to trauma, Boynton and Capretto warn that the former tends toward "reductionism," whereas the latter tends toward "obscurantism" (Introduction). Trauma studies is therefore in equal danger of obliterating and enshrining its subject matter; "It's not even a subject," the philosophers will say. The medical approach risks explaining trauma away, whereas the philosophical approach risks not explaining anything at all—a pitfall all too familiar to those of us who write and read within the continental tradition. Charged as I am with the task of examining the potential relationship between trauma studies and philosophy of religion, especially in its broadly continental iterations, I will therefore focus on the clearest point of their intersection, which is to say their shared—and indeed, potentially obscurantist—focus on the unassimilable, the inadmissible, and the unthinkable.

As theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub have argued, trauma can be distinguished from other forms of psychic injury by its unassimilability. The reason the survivor keeps repeating the traumatic “event”—usually in the form of dreams—is that trauma is not an event at all; the occurrence in question is so overwhelming that it cannot be integrated into the normal functioning of the psychic apparatus. In fact, trauma qua trauma disables the psychic apparatus itself, unraveling the one who undergoes it "such that [...] one cannot [even] speak of a traumatized

subject" (Di Nicola, Chapter 1). Nor can one isolate the “moment” of trauma or narrate it chronologically. Unsettling linearity at every turn, the temporality of trauma unfolds variously as deferral (Yancy, Chapter 7), prematurity (Chantker, Chapter 6), repetition (Capretto, Chapter 9), fragmentation (Stolerow, Chapter 2), frozenness (Severson, Chapter 3), absence (Boynton, Chapter 4), and the foreclosure of futurity (Orange, Chapter 3). There is a certain fidelity, therefore, to the theoretical insistence upon the unassimilable nature of trauma. Insofar as trauma dismantles the subjectivity and temporality of the one who undergoes it, it must likewise dismantle the thought that tries to think it. To paraphrase St. Augustine, if you can comprehend it, then it is not trauma; if it is trauma, then you cannot comprehend it.

Trauma's unthinkability is arguably intensified by its massive distribution and reduplication in the recursive forms of interminable wars, forced migration, unnatural disasters, neo-colonial capital, elemental toxicity, the serial execution of black Americans, and the normalization of sexual assault—not to mention the intensification of all these by means of the endless (and largely unconscious) repetitions of social, network, and cable media. As Tina Chantker suggests, a mark of this "age of trauma" is "the difficulty, if not impossibility, of isolating a zone in which trauma has not had an impact, as if trauma has become uncontrollable, contagious. Trauma, it seems, is the new normal: We are all living in a culture of trauma" (Chantker, Chapter 6). On the one hand, then, this omnipresence exacerbates our inability to think trauma; after all, "we" are constituted and undone by precisely the rupture of which we are trying to give an account. On the other hand, one might argue that it is precisely trauma as the unthinkable condition of thinking's possibility that actually calls for thinking. Heideggerian being, Derridean différence, the Levinasian Other—all of these exceed and disrupt the metaphysical categories to which they give rise, and therefore demand most pressingly, somehow, to be thought. As Kierkegaard's Johanne Climacus attests in the Philosophical Fragments, "this, then, is the ultimate paradox of thought: to want to discover something that thought cannot think." Or, as Derrida was fond of saying in seminar settings, "It's only the unthinkable that's worth thinking. Who would ever want to think the thinkable?" Along this line of thinking, trauma would be "the condition of (in)possibility of late capitalism itself, which is to say, that which most compellingly calls—right now—for thinking.

There are numerous dangers, however, in simply running trauma through the post-Heideggerian machine of the impossible. The first is that it risks speaking about (purportedly unspeakable) trauma without


and resolution—what Shelly Rambo calls “a transcendent imperative to ‘get over’ or ‘get beyond’ the experience” (Rambo, Chapter 10)—but also explanation and even justification. As Donna Orange worries, “to traumatized, shattered, devastated people, ‘transcendence’ might well sound empty. It could smack of ‘resilience’ [...] egoistic individualism, idealizing self-sufficiency, exhortations to get over it, to move on, to find transcendent meaning in one’s suffering” (Orange, Chapter 3). The old theological category for finding such transcendent meaning is “theodicy”: the attempt to justify the goodness of God in the face of unbearable suffering. Such attempts are notoriously unsatisfying and often ethically questionable; as Kenneth Surin has argued, to claim as some “philosophical theists” do that God inflicts suffering on certain people so that others might be redeemed, or to suggest that “the screams of the innocent” are quieter from the perspective of eternity “is precisely the sign of a corrupt mind.” It is ethically inusable to try to find a position from which trauma can be simply transcended.

Subjectively speaking, by contrast, the “transcendence of trauma” means just the opposite: Trauma cannot be transcended because it is itself transcendent. It cannot be understood or integrated because it is the incomprehensible and non-integratable itself. As Boynton demonstrates, this is the position of Emmanuel Levinas, who insisted on evil’s transcendence as a means of avoiding theodicy in the wake of World War II. For Levinas, nothing could explain or account for the “magnitude and intensity of evil” enacted as the Holocaust (Boynton, Chapter 4). Rather, this absolute disaster could only be thought as the unthinkable and “unjustifiable” itself: “In the appearing of evil,” Levinas writes, “there is announced [...] a counter-nature, a monstrousity, the disturbing and foreign in itself. And in this sense transcendance!” Thus does Levinas prevent us from justifying, incorporating, or accommodating evil. Even as it avoids and invalidates theodicy, however, trauma’s transcendence does not escape theology. To the contrary, it runs from the false comforts of philosophical theism right up the sheer rock face of the apocalyptic.

Insofar as it takes place as “the unbearable and undurable [...] the unsayable” and the unexperienceable (Stolorow, Chapter 2), Levinasian trauma begins to look uncannily like the God of negative theology. Like the source of all things, trauma in its desubjectifying and transcendent valence exceeds “everything perceived and understood, everything perceivable and understandable, all that is not and all that is,” and can only be endured, as Pseudo-Dionysius counsels his apprentice, by “an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything.” Levinas himself comes close to
identifying the transcendence of evil with the transcendence of God, locating the “breakthrough of the Good there, where the evil suffered by the other man” demands that I attend and intervene: “Theophany. Revelation. This is the horror of the evil that addresses me.”

On the one hand, to call evil the site of the appearance of the God(odd) is to interrupt any philosophical effort to understand it with the ethical imperative to respond. On the other hand, it is also to grant evil a revelatory, even divine status—“as if,” Boynton quotes Derrida, “the Holocaust [or the Rwandan genocide; or the extermination and forced removal of Native Americans; or the intertwined hyperobjects of global warming, capitalism, and anti-blackness] were an uninterpretable manifestation of divine violence” (Boynton, Chapter 4). And here, the apophatic risks giving way to the sadistic. The unknowable, ineffable Un-ground morphs into the “batter my heart” God, the God who granted Julian “three wounds,” the God who demands Isaac, the God of substitutionary atonement (read: torture) who keeps Christian women in the abusive relationships they consider their “cross to bear.” Again, then, “the transcendence of trauma” collides with theology at both extremes, slipping into theodic coherence at the limits of the thinkable and masochistic “veneration” (Capretto, Chapter 9) at the limits of the unthinkable.

Likewise caught between these extremes, the subfield of philosophy of religion has been accused in recent years of being “crypto-theological,” and, as such, nothing more than what Jonathan Z. Smith calls “data” for the genuinely academic study of religion. As Timothy Knepper charges, “philosophy of religion is usually either a fictionalized and rarified theology or the latest critical notion of some continental philosopher,” most of whose ruminations are so obscure they recede into the mists of mystical theology. One could make a strong case, then, against the involvement of continental philosophy of religion (CPR) with trauma studies, likely as the latter is to seduce the former into the familiar terrain of the numinous: our cozy mysterian tremendum. At the same time, it is precisely CPR’s attention to subterranean theologies that allows it to uncover the various and covert theories animating purportedly secular disciplines such as trauma (or indeed, religious) studies—not for the sake of vindicating any particular theology, but for the sake of seeing and understanding it, especially where it is least obvious. Moreover, there are strategies within this liminal (in)discipline that might contribute to the seemingly impossible task of coming to terms with trauma—a task that will involve thinking at the limits of thinking (Derrida), speaking from silence (Kierkegaard), and breaking the very logic of the language that structures oppression (Irigaray, Glissant, Rambouil). In terms of the particular double-bind animating this volume—the dual “traps of reductionism and obscurantism” (Introduction) harbored within the polyvalent transcendence of trauma—the continental philosophy of religion might offer Derridean “negotiation” as a place to start. If it is the case that empirical and theoretical trauma—what Derrida would call the “conditional” and the “unconditional,” respectively—each “falls into ruin” without the other, if it is the case that trauma without the unthinkable is annihilated and trauma within the thinkable is divided, then thinking trauma would take shape as a constant tacking back and forth between these poles. Such thinking would therefore entail the concrete work of “learning, reading, understanding, interpreting the rule, and even calculating,” so that the specific and unjustly distributed contours of trauma become as clear as possible. At the same time, it would require attending to the persistent unassimilability, indeed unbearity (Stolarow, Chapter 2) that makes trauma what it “is,” obstructing at all turns the theodic impulse that would assimilate trauma into the regime of the ordinary—or the simply “thinkable.”

Even as it brings such strategies to bear on the question of trauma, however, CPR must also allow trauma to call it into question: to unsettle its coherence, trouble its boundaries, and reveal its constitutive erasures. Perhaps most pressingly, an attunement to trauma must disrupt the smooth, continental heritage that begins with Descartes and allegedly unfolds internally, dialectically, through Spinoza, Hume, Kant, Schleiermacher, Hegel, Feuerbach, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida, Deleuze, Nancy, Badiou, and Meilllassou. To be sure, it is important to interrupt this mostly white, male, and Christian lineage, as some syllabi and textbooks now do, with an emphasis upon the Jewishness of its occasional Jews, and by turning to the work of, say, Fanon, Césaire, Glissant, Irigaray, Kristeva, Butler, and Malabou. But such tactics of representational inclusion fail on their own to account for the racist and sexist logic that has formed and continues to form the continental and philosophical canon as such. If it is the case, as George Yancy argues, that “the social lives of white people are entangled within a larger socio-historical matrix that implicates them, beyond their will, in the perpetuation of racial injustice” (Yancy, Chapter 7), then the same must be said of white philosophy, as well. To come to terms with the un-category of trauma, the continental philosophy of religion will therefore have to come to terms with the collective trauma.
its dominant lineage has justified, encoded, and largely ignored during the long history of European imperialism.

Although there are numerous ways in which such work might be done, three interresonant approaches come immediately to mind, all of which have long been in operation among critical race, feminist, and post- and decolonial thinkers both within and around the field. The first would be to continue the admittedly insufficient project of widening the racial, sexual, and religious scope of "continental philosophy of religion" and its typically lionized figureheads. In so doing, however, it is important to read such texts not as expansions or varieties of the "core" tradition—as if to say, "and here is the decolonial/queer/black/ArabJewish form of continental philosophy"—but rather as entangled unveilings of the traumatic encodings that help constitute that fiercely guarded core. When, for example, Glissant uncovers the "nomadic," "rhizomatic" character of European conquest, he is not "applying" Deleuze and Guattari to the colonial situation in the Americas. Rather, he is locating a colonial logic within the aspirationally anti-dominological thought even of Deleuze and Guattari. From this perspective, then, minoritarian philosophies do not "diversify" the canon; far more powerfully, they expose its unwitting constitution by the very exclusions, hierarchies, and tropes it allegedly deconstructs—including that of canonicity itself.

The second, interrelated, and equally obvious approach would be to continue to attend to the explicit constructions of racial hierarchies—however overt or incidental—in the *Urtext* of the continental tradition as it reflects on religion. It should be impossible, for example, to teach or write about Hegel's critique of Spinoza's pantheism without exposing the infantilized and feminized "Indian philosophy" Hegel maps onto the teachings of the "Oriental" Jew. It should be impossible to say anything about Aufhebung at all without acknowledging its sources both in Christian eschatology and in Hegel's racialized projection of geo-temporal "progress," which moved from an allegedly ahistorical Africa through the ancient Orient and mid-life Middle East to find its dialectical *teles* in modern Europe. It should be imperative to expose, not simply the well-rehearsed anti-Semitism of the politically disastrous Heidegger, but also the persistent racism of his defender and critic Hannah Arendt, who in the very process of criticizing the European conquest of Africa re-justifies it by asserting that the inhabitants of that continent had never reached "any adequate expression of human reason or human passion [. . .] and [. . .] had developed human institutions only at a very low level." The list, unfortunately, could stretch on for days—from Hume's strictly racialized "development" of human religion, to Kant's denial that Africans and Native Americans possessed the "reason" that constitutes true religion, to Julia Kristeva's more recent insistence that Europe re-discover its Christian heritage to combat the invasive force of "Allah's madmen." Any continental philosophy of religion that attempts to think trauma must face up to the specifically racial trauma endorsed, enacted, and inspired by its heroic foreparents in its various constructions of religion.

Finally, philosophy of religion must learn to listen out for the more subtle signs of trauma within the very canon that gathers itself against it. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison entertains literary scholars to attend to the "dark, abiding, signing African presence" that haunts even the whitest of American literature. "Even, and especially, when American texts are not 'about' Africanist presences or characters or narrative or idiom," she argues, "the shadow hovers in implication, in sign, in line of demarcation." Especially in its romanticized presentations of autonomy, individuality, property, and freedom, Morrison suggests, the American canon implicitly and neurotically constitutes itself over against the heteronomous, exchangeable, owned, and unfree black slave.

Similarly, European philosophy's constant preoccupations with the same tropes are a clear function of its emergence alongside—and by means of—the European slave trade. "The inherent contradiction of human slavery had always generated dualisms in thought," writes Brion Davis, "but by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Europeans had arrived at the greatest dualism of all—the momentous division between an increasing devotion to liberty in Europe and an expanding mercantile system based on Negro [slave] labor in America." It is therefore crucial to read these "Enlightenment" texts—and their romantic and even postmodern critic-inheritors—as constructed by means of a strategic erasure of the unthinkable Middle Passage that enabled them. As Charles Mills has argued, it would not be possible to undertake a Cartesian meditation as a black man—much less a black woman. The "global doubt" that plagues Descartes is simply not available to people who are owned and oppressed, Mills explains:

The whole point of subordinate black experience, or the general experience of oppressed groups, is that the subordinated are in no position to doubt the existence of the world and other people, especially that of their oppressors. [ . . . ] If your daily existence is largely defined by oppression, by *forced* intercourse with the world, it is not going to occur
to you that doubt about your oppressor’s existence could in any way be a serious or pressing philosophical problem.27

Not existential doubt or the cogito alone, but all of the founders’ purportedly neutral categories—like “reason,” “nature,” “good,” “evil,” and especially “God” and “man”—are in large part the anxious productions of European men seeking to justify their liberty, property, and dominion over against the owned, tortured, and dislocated African and indigenous other. They are efforts, in other words, to transcend the trauma with which they have been complicit.

When it comes to coming to terms with trauma, then, there is a disciplinary imperative not to try to transcend it. To refuse to deal any longer in the ahistorical “universals” that cover over the constitutive violence of the European adventure, and to let trauma do the un-working it does to individual and collective identities alike. But it is equally imperative not to grant such untranscendable trauma the status of transcendence, which would configure it as somehow necessary, beautiful, or worthy of silent reverie. Neither transcendent nor transcendent, trauma must rather be constantly negotiated—thought where it seems unthinkable, un-thought where it seems commonplace, and ruinous of any philosophy that claims to have nothing to do with it.

NOTES

5. In a now-infamous memo, Summers wrote, “shouldn’t the World Bank be encouraging MORE migration of the dirty industries to the LDC? [. . .] I think the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country is impeccable. [. . .] I’ve always thought that underpopulated countries in Africa are vastly UNDER-polluted;[.] their air quality is probably vastly inefficiently low compared to Los Angeles or Mexico City” (Larry Summers, cited in David Naguib Pellow, Resisting Global Toxics: Transnational Movements for Environmental Justice (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 9.

Acknowledgments

While all collaborative volumes are fruits of collective labor, not all germinate in such a mercurial political and intellectual season as this one has. Rather than suffering from problems of currency, this volume's relevance grew exponentially as it developed before and in the aftermath of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. For this reason, the editors are indebted to its contributors not only for the originality and rigor of their work, but also for the care with which they reexamined their thinking midway through a shifting cultural landscape. In particular, we are grateful for Mary-Jane Rubenstein's generative and timely afterword, which proved both methodologically instructive and politically therapeutic for the project as a whole.

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