'Un Imaginable Boundaries': Performativity, Theology, and the Study of Trauma

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‘Un imaginable boundaries’: Performativity, Theology, and the Study of Trauma

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‘Un imaginable boundaries’: Performativity, Theology, and the Study of Trauma

A dissertation presented

by

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Abstract

This dissertation locates versions of the Fall and original sin at the center of ostensibly secular theories of trauma and extreme violence. The first chapter reviews genealogies of trauma and Christian theological writings that engage with clinical and literary trauma studies. The central chapters read Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery*, Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience*, and Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* for the ways that fallenness orients social and political ethics. They examine each work within the respective thinker’s corpus and within their surrounding scholarly contexts.

Juxtaposing these appearances of the Fall demonstrates that it operates variously across different projects and methods. The Fall may result in the universalization of trauma, or in a failure to recognize that trauma occurs. It tends across these divergent outcomes to posit implicit definitions of the human that are raced and gendered. The fact that this phenomenon is unacknowledged in the theories themselves subverts the concerns for justice that animate these texts. The performative work of theory is emphasized in order to clarify its underacknowledged participation and activity, to demonstrate that theory cannot function in a solely descriptive mode.

In the closing chapter, I propose that the Fall within theories and theologies of trauma and extremity performs tacit aesthetic education. It trains those who engage with these texts to regard harmed persons as fallen in a way that suggests them to be lacking,
diminished in their humanity, and either needing or lost to personal and social
redemption. I follow a thread of aesthetic thought that winds from Caruth on Paul de Man
into Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s reformulation or ‘sabotage’ of Friedrich Schiller’s
notion of aesthetic education. Reading Bhanu Kapil’s experimental work *Ban en
Banlieue*, I reflect on the modes of complicity involved in creatively representing trauma.
Kapil’s book contains self-consciousness about the action involved in writing that I strive
to adopt in theoretical discourse.
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Toby Oldham is tired of me being in school but tireless in his loving support. Dante Craig brings new sparkle and grace to every day.
To the memories of

Chin Bow Ark

and

Debra Litsinger
Chapter 1

Tracking the Fall in Theory and Theology

This dissertation asks what it means that something resembling original sin appears in contemporary accounts of trauma and extremity. At its center are close readings of psychiatrist Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery* and literary scholar Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience*, two works thought to be foundational for their respective branches of trauma studies. Both books appeared in the 1990s and claimed that ‘trauma’ provided an epistemic key and moral point of focus in matters of social justice and interpersonal ethics. Trauma represented the undoing of recognizable human life and agency. It was also the locus at which the individual life was most intensely social and historical, the state or point from which political solidarity and existential redemption would have to emerge. While Herman implies the Fall in her accounts of shattering and redemptive transcendence, Caruth explicitly elaborates an identification of trauma with falling. In the course of my research I found that Giorgio Agamben’s theory of *nuda vita* or bare life, which in his political theory refers to a socially and politically abandoned status, led in his aesthetic theory directly back to Augustine’s account of the Fall. This recurrence across authors of quite different training and methods is the present project’s object of study.

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As I pressed further into each of these writer’s argumentative trajectories, I noticed that an aesthetic reading of the forms of bodies and lives figured powerfully in all three. These theorists have, in the process of describing trauma and bare life, generated implicit theories of the human. While intending to center those who are socially and politically vulnerable, these theories nonetheless construct areas of exclusion and negation. In the process, they reproduce in various ways and to varying degrees hierarchies of value that correspond with structures of power and oppression.

There is no singular theology of ‘the Fall,’ and no consensus within Christianity about the status and meaning of original sin for morality or salvation. To say that a narrative or logical structure resembling Christian accounts of the Fall can be found in ostensibly non-religious theories of trauma, then, begs an avalanche of questions from the standpoint of religious studies and theology: Which fall—Augustinian, Calvinist, Pelagian, Arminian? What is the content of this fall? What does it argue or assume about free will, redemption, hereditary guilt, and predestination?

These are intellectually responsible questions, yet I cannot answer them in any thorough or even preliminarily satisfactory way. What I am tracing is something much more ambiguous and unsteady, the movement of a conceptual shape across time, disciplines, and divergent voices. The present study is not a genealogy, though it shares the genealogical concern with how rhetorical and ideological weight accumulates over time and across discourses. This is a study of language and what it does, the deployment of trauma as fallenness in written practice.

My questions, then, are the following: Having observed that dominant discourses about trauma assert some kind of plunge into degradation, distance from wholeness, or
need for redemption, with what aims and effects does the Fall circulate within these discourses? In any particular account that renders trauma as falling, what forms of violence are made visible, and which are obscured? Who suffers, who heals, and how are these processes linked to larger structures of power, legitimacy, verification, and oppression?

In this chapter’s eventual analysis of contemporary Christian theologians writing about trauma, the relation of the fall to redemption has heightened significance. How does grace operate, and who can receive it? What agency do individuals (supposedly) have in undoing trauma’s effects on themselves and others? What does it mean when trauma is decisively set up against redemption and salvation?

**On Genealogies: Trauma and Modernity**

An account of trauma theory could choose among countless possible starting points. I will not attempt to summarize trauma theory, but I will attempt to sufficiently situate the present dissertation within the field in order to illustrate why I pick up my analysis picks rather late in the game. I have purposefully zeroed in on a particular set of conversations initiated in the 1990s to show how they have taken shape around notions of fallenness. This pattern occurs not only in theorizations of trauma but, as will later be shown, in biopolitical accounts of extremity, violence, and colonialism. What I will perform is, then, not a genealogy or an account of the concept of trauma’s evolution over time. It nonetheless shares with genealogical studies the notion that a concept such as trauma (or for that matter bare life) acquires its meaning through use. Trauma is not a single or fixed thing, though it refers to the occurrence and impact of very real violence and injury. Each
study of trauma contributes to what is meant by trauma; the term is reformulated in ongoing, contested discursive engagements.

There is an important contrast between my methods and genealogies, and those of psychiatrist Judith Herman, whose work will be the subject of chapter two. She too traces trauma’s discursive and cultural appearance, beginning with late nineteenth century studies of hysteria. Herman emphasizes that trauma comes in and out of focus with the rise and fall of particular political struggles, which repeatedly ‘discover’ trauma’s reality and effects. Hysteria is thus part of a choppy lineage of awareness that also encompasses shell shock and victims of domestic violence. As a clinician working primarily with survivors of abuse, Herman’s familiarity with intersecting issues of gender oppression, controversies about memory, and the possibility of a ‘talking cure’ make psychoanalytic studies of hysteria a logical place to begin. Herman promotes the creation of a trauma narrative from detailed memories of the events that caused trauma. She believes not only in the healing power of such storytelling for the individual, but that those who are willing and able to take their stories public thereby counter oppression and contribute to social justice. *Trauma and Recovery* aims to persuade the reader that trauma is essentially the same across experiences as varied as concentration camp survival, intimate partner violence, and military combat. Much of its focus is thus on shared symptomatology across different types of victims, and on outlining a healing process to be practiced with trauma victims of all kinds. I am in full agreement with Herman that recognition of harm is an intensely political issue, granted and denied in ways propelled by both oppression and organized resistance. I would, however, counter her positivist impulse with a performative one, emphasizing trauma’s construction as a concept alongside the

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3 Herman, 9.
undeniably real suffering to which it (always differentially) attaches. The assumption that trauma is a phenomenon that entirely preexists its identification and theorization is what genealogies of trauma set out to explore and contest.

There are three genealogical works that bear mentioning, even as I set up what is decidedly not a genealogy. Medically trained anthropologists Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman wish to push against trauma’s naturalization, to demonstrate its historical construction and development into “a realm of truth” and its decisive place in an emergent “moral economy.” The focus is not on trauma itself but on the ways in which relationships of power and knowledge are funneled through the concept. Trauma’s relationship to social inequality—the fact that “the way in which one’s suffering is viewed will depend on their status or their social usefulness”—demonstrates that diagnosis is not a straightforward act of identifying a preexisting phenomenon. Rather, trauma is defined and deployed by institutions and the persons working within them or appealing to them for resources and assistance.

Examining three sites that represent, respectively, “psychiatric victimology, humanitarian psychiatry, and the psychotraumatology of exile,” Fassin and Rechtman look at how each field has created in turn sets of patients and professionals whose relationships to trauma as a concept are necessarily active and tactical. Since trauma has become “the central reality of violence,” one must identify or be identified with trauma in order to be recognized and validated as having experienced violence. To understand how this happens or fails to happen, Fassin and Rechtman undertake what they call a ‘dual

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5 Ibid., 30.
6 Ibid., 10-1.
7 Ibid., 22.
genealogy’ that examines the parallel pathways by which trauma emerges as both a scientific and moral category.  

For Roger Luckhurst, whose primary interest is in what he calls “cultural trauma,” it is crucial to attend to trauma’s development in both clinical and aesthetic domains. While these are in some sense two disparate projects (and are, indeed, presented respectively as Part I and Part II of the monograph), both are concerned with the relationship between modernity and extremity. Trauma registers cultural stressors, from the sensory overload of industrialization to the more diffuse “psychic costs of capitalist modernity.” One of Luckhurst’s key arguments is that works of literature, photography, and other cultural productions play important roles in constructing “the idea of post-traumatic subjectivity.” This is not to assert that trauma is imaginary, but to promote a nuanced view of the ‘knotted’ multiplicity of disciplinary perspectives that consolidate it as a concept.

While Luckhurst tries to construct a fairly linear account of trauma’s development as a clinical category, Ruth Leys argues that a genealogical approach functions most effectively by taking up disjointed scenes and tracking a set of “perpetually resurfacing theoretical and practical difficulties.” While trauma may circulate quite differently in different situations, Leys argues that major debates persistently hit an impasse around “the problem of imitation, defined as a problem of hypnotic imitation.” Leys further describes this pattern as oscillating between hypothesizing traumatic phenomena as mimesis and anti-mimesis. Trauma’s conceptual evolution is not sequential but

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8 Ibid., 30.
10 Ibid., 14-5.
“irruptive,” which means that similar debates are staged over and over again “as if for the first time.” Mimetic accounts of trauma emphasize involuntary repetitions that seem to arise from the victim’s own agency. Conversely, antimimetic approaches understand trauma to be “a purely external event that befalls a fully constituted subject.” Leys does not attempt to advocate for one side over the other, but to suggest that the desire to resolve the conflict or achieve a sense of finality or closure may itself distract from what is really at stake in theorizing (or treating) trauma.

Taken together, these three genealogical projects demonstrate that trauma is continually redefined in contentious negotiations with medical, legal, and economic institutions. In the case of the nineteenth century railway accident, often taken to be the earliest type of event regularly labeled as trauma, this mix of interests and influences is already present. There are medical professionals who research, diagnose, and treat a classifiable ailment (railway spine). There is also the legal matter of liability—determination of culpability and compensation—which is an economic concern for both victims and companies. In addition, railway trauma has a more diffuse cultural significance that represents something beyond dangerous travel, something having to do with the overwhelming nature of industrialization. Luckhurst argues that attitudes and anxieties about railroads match broader responses to modernity. “The railway accident was the encounter of the general public with the consequences of industrialization that had largely been concealed within the factory system.” The public, here, is a category with both geographical and class connotations, inclining toward those who were both

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12 Ibid., 10. For further explication of what is meant by mimetic and antimimetic, see also Leys, 36-7.
13 Ibid., 298-9.
metropolitan and non-laborers. The industrial accident is, moreover, an important lens into shifting political and economic arrangements—the role of insurance, for instance, and the emergence of “the statistical society” that records and predicts the rates of various kinds of harm and misfortune.

Like Fassin and Rechtman, Luckhurst, and Leys, I am concerned primarily with broad cultural understandings of trauma. I do not attempt to construct my own definition or to describe particular traumatic events. I also refrain from making concrete recommendations about psychiatric diagnosis or treatment, though I occasionally point to factors that might shape clinical categories and techniques, as well as their effects. I am interested in how discussion of trauma is accompanied by other concerns that are equally complex—notions of personal and political responsibility, injury, and morality. I ask how trauma supports or dissents from a variety of critical, political, and sometimes personal agendas. Yet I do not claim that trauma is ‘only’ a constructed concept or an instrument of population management. Trauma describes real suffering, even as the concept may have a larger role in shaping that suffering’s experience and description than a thinker such as Herman would allow.

This project nonetheless departs methodologically from all of the above works in significant ways. Firstly, I make no attempt to cover the history of trauma theory, which I leave to these previous works as something that has been thoroughly and repeatedly carried out, if in quite different ways. I also do not attempt to cover the enormous realm of trauma theory with a unifying hypothesis that could apply to the whole. I am not arguing, as in Leys, that a common phenomenon is happening beneath different

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14 Luckhurst, 24-5.
15 Ibid., 25-6.
appearances. Rather, I take what is the same on the surface—some kind of fall that seems to have a moral weight that aligns it with the Fall—and ask what its recurrence means and does. I ask why a similar structure reappears in writings about both trauma and biopolitically conceived states of extremity, and what meaning might be made of its repetition. I will argue that beneath this similar structuring element, a swarm of very different things occurs. My performative view of theory, which I draw in large part from Cathy Caruth, does not exempt the present text from that process. What I am ‘discovering’ was both there for the finding and reconstituted in my finding it, and the final chapter seeks to imagine what might be done with this new-and-old ‘object’ of study.

Cathy Caruth is considered by many to have initiated contemporary trauma studies in the humanities. I first selected Caruth and Herman’s works based on the frequency with which they appear as authoritative and foundational sources, and their complementary respective locations in literary theoretical and clinical realms. Since I first began writing this dissertation, both have issued new editions of the books under examination here, speaking to their continued influence and prestige. Both have, moreover, remained staunch defenders of their works over the past twenty years. I do not know whether some measure of self-historicization would answer any of the limits that I see in these works, but it is notable that Herman and Caruth do not consider this kind of historicization necessary.

While Caruth does not name a precise historical origin for what she calls ‘our catastrophic age,’ it is clear from the sources with which she engages and the stories she chooses to tell that this age begins approximately with Europe’s experience of World
War I. The events around which it seems to revolve, though it is never directly named as the center of her theory, are those of the Holocaust. Her research draws heavily, though often in uncited ways, from Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s *Testimony*, a set of essays that grew out of their collaborative work with the Fortunoff Archives at Yale University. Many of Caruth’s articulations of trauma and history are nearly verbatim repetitions of phrases and sentences that appear in Felman’s writings on the Holocaust and World War II. It is nonetheless important to recognize that their projects are distinct undertakings. Chapter 3 will pursue these topics in greater detail.

**Theological Shapes**

I have stated, and must continually repeat, that the versions of original sin implied or invoked in theories and theologies of trauma do not align perfectly with any traditional theological model. It is still worth presenting a brief outline of what some of these traditional views are—not in order to map them onto descriptions of trauma, but to highlight elements of identifiable Christian doctrines that curiously recur elsewhere without citation.

Augustine is often (though not universally) thought to be the first Christian theologian to consolidate an authoritative doctrine of original sin. Key to his view of the Fall is that Adam’s “primal” sin is inherited by all human beings from conception, and it is because of this first sin that all humans will experience death.  

16 This is a warranted fate both because of shared and common guilt,  

17 and disordered desires and ignorance that

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17 Humans have, in fact, a “common life” that they share with one another and with Adam, and “individual” or “proper” lives that personally belong to each. Jesse Couenhoven relates this
will inevitably lead each person to faulty action. Two aspects of this doctrinal matrix bear pointing out: 1) There is both the originating act of sin (which belongs properly to Adam) and the universal condition, what Augustine usually means by “original sin,” that it produces in all who follow; and 2) sin is degrading in a bodily sense, the flesh with which it is associated inextricably bound to suffering and death.

While original sin, because of its inherited nature, cannot be avoided, the first sin could have been. The first sin set humanity off course from following its created nature. This relates to the theological claim that recalling humanity’s original perfection can help direct us to what is right and just in the present. In John Calvin, for instance, the memory of the original and un-fallen state is instructive for approaching earthly life. Realizing that humans have strayed from the purpose for which they were created ought to engender humility and relentless striving: “It is not the will of God…that we should forget the primeval dignity which he bestowed on our first parents—a dignity which may well stimulate us to the pursuit of goodness and justice.” Calvin, largely following Augustine, also famously produced a doctrine of predestination that gives God’s agency

theory to the ways in which Plato and Plotinus posited “the pre-existence of the soul” (Jesse Couenhoven “Augustine’s Doctrine of Original Sin,” in *Augustinian Studies* 36.2 (2005): 368).

The concision of this summary is indebted to Couenhoven’s above-cited article. Couenhoven importantly delineates that Augustine continually redeveloped his thinking on original sin over the time of his writings. The points I am extracting are repeatedly made across multiple writings, but that does not mean that they exist in complete harmony with each other or in univocal consistency across Augustine’s corpus.

It is also worth noting at the outset that debates over whether sin is a condition shared even prior to an individual’s action or experience of it have a surface resemblance to a question that frequently arises in trauma studies in the humanities. Intergenerational and structural traumas are thought to be transmitted through history. This raises frequent questions about whether trauma is primarily or most meaningfully a pervasive condition that humans inherit (environmentally or genetically), or something that besets individuals in the wake of particular events. See this dissertation’s third chapter for a more in-depth analysis of this matter.

My thanks go to Mark Jordan for an illuminating conversation on this point.

full credit for any possible human redemption. Humanity will, because of Adam’s sin in the Garden of Eden, continually reproduce evil, sin, and death. Deliverance from this state and restoration to life and righteousness only occurs through “supernatural grace” that brings one to Christ.  

In a contemporary reformulation of the doctrine of original sin, process theologian Marjorie Suchocki divides it into three aspects: Sin through violence, which refers to a universally human propensity for aggression; sin through solidarity, by which Suchocki means that any individual person’s sin in some sense belongs to all of humanity; and sin through social inheritance, which refers to entrenched systems of dominance and oppression that humans are both born into and perpetuate. Citing Irenaeus and Schleiermacher, Suchocki argues for an understanding of violence that recognizes human beings as participating in an evolutionary process of becoming. This is both a biological and spiritual claim, joining theological premises with scientific arguments about continuities between heritable behavioral tendencies in animals and humans. Suchocki emphasizes that an unavoidable physical inheritance underlies our capacity to do harm, that innate aggression is the raw material “from which our sin is fashioned.” This does not mean, however, that violence itself is inevitable. Rather, once one can perceive violence as such it becomes clear that there is (or was) an option to act otherwise.

While original, survival-driven violence may have occurred in a state of moral innocence, God now issues a “transcendent call” to become aware of human interdependence and relationality. This awakening will lead us to refrain from

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21 Ibid., 2.1.6-8.
23 Ibid., 95.
“unnecessary violence.” It also removes any prior innocence, under which violence and aggression may have counted as ‘evil’ but did not qualify as sin. Human survival having been achieved, the instincts that brought it about must be redirected as they now threaten not only other humans but other forms of life, and the planet itself.

The coming into being of human “memory, empathy, and imagination” is for Suchocki simultaneously the emergence of sin. Rather than rebellion against an original, paradisical state, sinful violence rebels against the goodness of creation through which God intends human well being. Solidarity signifies that “we are affected by the sins of others, and our own sins likewise have an effect upon all others.” Existential anxiety of the sort that occupies Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr is, Suchocki argues, less a matter of fearing death than a tacit awareness that violence is “mediated to us all through our interconnectedness.” This, too, is part of a greater human process of becoming, as taking another’s sin into oneself (for which Christ is a model) is “an essential step” towards the joining together in transformative love.

Society supports and transmits sin over time and across generations, and the relational focus of this theology allows that institutions profoundly shape “the consciousness and conscience of each individual within her or his sphere of influence.” Sin is thus not a matter of consciously choosing wrongly: “one is caught in sin without

24 Ibid., 96, 99. The term “unnecessary violence” leaves open a space of irresolution, even as Suchocki is laying out a redemptive theological narrative.
25 There is in Suchocki’s account an unexamined question of whose survival is assumed to be secure, and why those who are secure implicitly constitute ‘the human.’
26 Ibid., 98-9.
27 Ibid., 102.
28 Ibid., 108.
29 Ibid., 111.
30 Ibid., 118.
virtue of consent. Original sin simply creates sinners.”

Communities have responsibilities that parallel the individual’s to recognize and name their wrongs, and to transform themselves away from violent modes of operation.

The Fall, for Suchocki, is neither a catastrophe nor a loss; it is simply the state in which humans live. “[I]t is the stage upon which we play out the drama of our human lives.” It does not refer to a condition of wretchedness so much as to the ways that humanity stumbles and gropes toward the greater purpose it has the potential to fulfill. Failures of memory, empathy, and imagination are failures to transcend the self. This stands in contrast to accounts of original sin that frame the Fall as reaching beyond what a human is supposed to be or know.

These three versions of the Fall were not selected at random, but they do not come close to covering the ways in which original sin has been interpreted, narrated, and debated. I have hardly done justice to any of the three thinkers cited above, and have glided over both the contexts of debate in which they presented their views and the internal complexities of each account. I only mean to demonstrate that the Fall constitutes a lens through which Christians have formulated, and continue to formulate, their views of the relationship between God and humanity—particularly around matters of sin, blame, and the possibility of redemption. What my more extended summary of Suchocki intends to show is that the Fall is not a fixed idea that grinds the imagination to a halt. Nor is it a

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31 Ibid., 126.
32 Ibid., 157.
33 Ibid., 161.
34 All three of these concepts will figure heavily in the chapters that follow, and are key terms in trauma theory.
35 Ibid., 46.
doctrine that one can only accept or reject. The Fall is reimagined over and over by those living with and invested in its narratives.

Non-theological trauma theories that echo the Fall are assessing similarly vast questions of meaning and hope. They similarly raise (even when they are not aware of doing so) questions about culpability and innocence, and I will argue throughout this dissertation that many of the answers they generate lead to disparate recognition of humanity and harm. Before moving out of explicitly theological discourse, however, it is important to consider how the Fall figures in theological accounts of trauma.

Contemporary theologians who adopt trauma theory as a key framework for Christian ethics must grapple, doctrinally and pragmatically, with its relationship to redemption and salvation.

*The Shape of Trauma in Contemporary Christian Theology*

In *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*, Shelly Rambo intentionally eschews frameworks of sin and guilt. She instead emphasizes shame and vulnerability as universal aspects of the human condition, “the degree to which we can wound and be wounded by others.”

Shifting away from a focus on sin that would directly invoke the Fall comes together with Rambo’s discomfort with thinking about redemption in relation to trauma. Rambo is concerned that, “redemption can become a gloss or a kind of fantasy, turning us away from, rather than toward, the complex realities of human existence.” This is a political as well as theological stance, since, “The language of resurrection is, in many

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37 ibid., 147.
senses, the language of the oppressor."\textsuperscript{38} Redemptive logic can urge us to forget the past and its pain (even that which is not really past), shifting blame for ongoing suffering to those who just won’t move on.

There is also a strong tendency, particularly in U.S. contexts, for narratives of trauma to speed towards an assertion that all can be recovered. In Christian theology, this takes the form of “claiming a redemptive locus in resurrection.”\textsuperscript{39} Rambo’s strategy is thus to prolong reflections on the space between death and resurrection, dwelling with “what exceeds death but cannot be clearly identified as life.”\textsuperscript{40} This approach allows us to acknowledge loss as real, and to respect mourning as a necessary part of life. Reading the Gospel of John, Rambo emphasizes the role of the paraclete who will guide the disciples and be their continuing link to Jesus after his death.\textsuperscript{41} The spirit or breath that Jesus hands over is not an immediate source of understanding or new life. Instead, ‘something of death’ is left to the disciples, and the presence of death in life will be an inheritance that they have to continually live and interpret.\textsuperscript{42}

Rambo moves away from accounts of witnessing as an act that embodies heroic guarantees. The spirit enables a witness to trauma, she argues, not to heal or transform, but to persist in a way that is subtly accompanied by love.\textsuperscript{43} Even resurrection is not an accomplished image of new life, but a registering that there are forms of life that are no longer possible, that any new life will be fragile growth from a site of impossibility.\textsuperscript{44} Rambo argues that there is a need to focus less on promises of eventual salvation than on

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 129.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 148.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 144.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 102-3.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 106-7.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 99.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 78-9.
“life configured as remaining [italics original].”\textsuperscript{45} The Spirit elicits careful attention to what remains without the promise that all can be ultimately restored. Redemption lies in “the work of witnessing, the work of the Spirit between death and life.”\textsuperscript{46}

Rather than putting the world back together, Rambo aims to give resources for living through the ways in which life continually and agonizingly comes apart. The Spirit dwells in spaces before words that can testify to life-- where there is only breath: “This prior moment of imagination is the breath of witness before the breath of life.”\textsuperscript{47} Language, in a sense, cannot testify to trauma. It can only show through gaps, through failures of witness and words, that there is something between divine presence and absence.\textsuperscript{48} “The dynamics of witness are set in motion by discourse,” but “…love is birthed through a failure of comprehension.”\textsuperscript{49} A failure of comprehension that is nonetheless a space of imagination: This is the place from which healing must begin.

Pneumatology is thus what disrupts the trajectory from fall to redemption, “yielding a different vocabulary of truth telling, testimony and witness.”\textsuperscript{50} Rambo cites Rebecca Chopp’s insistence on the need to reshape moral imaginaries by practicing “theology as poetics.”\textsuperscript{51} Theology ought not to speak in language of declarative truth-telling, and must instead seek an aesthetic that demonstrates how the possibility of “overarching frameworks” is undone when theory or theology consider trauma. Perhaps the most important ethical corrective offered by Rambo’s theology is a refusal of logics of “martyrdom and sacrifice” that teleologically rationalize violence.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 144.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 124.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 124-5.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 133.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 164.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 164-5.
In a critique that parallels Rambo’s, anthropologist and theorist Elizabeth Povinelli highlights the way that an abstracted Christian logic infuses secular thought about how lives are valued, protected, and given up. Marginalized subjects are “aggressively abandoned within a temporal horizon of a future perspective: a future from whose perspective their present suffering has already been mourned and buried.”52 There is an implicit theological structure to this mode of justification that overrides advocacy for rights, protections, interventions, and spaces of autonomy. Suffering is always already redeemed by projected outcomes that will assuredly occur at a (necessarily indeterminate) future point. In this manner, “violent death becomes sacrifice and ceases to be scandalous.”53 Abandonment that ought to be understood as aggressive is framed as a passive submission to the necessities of history, governance, or civilization. While this version of redemption does not always invoke God, it does rely on faith (in markets, for instance, or race, or forms of nationalism).54

I privilege Rambo’s work because it explicitly and intentionally departs from thinking about human suffering in a framework of fall and redemption. Yet even in Rambo, there is an ambiguity between trauma as an event and trauma as an inherited condition. While “the historical dimensions of trauma” guarantee that, “no one remains untouched by overwhelming violence,”55 there are nonetheless events that seem to divide life into pre- and post-, before and after.56 This tension mirrors the two understandings of fallenness inherited from Augustine. It is not part of Rambo’s project to decide whether

53 Ibid., 167.
54 Aggressive abandonment will return in the fourth chapter’s reading of Giorgio Agamben’s concept of bare life.
55 Rambo, 9.
56 Ibid., 149.
there was a time or human condition before trauma, and she does not specify the relationship between trauma and sin.

Others draw clearer lines that cast the traumatized person in a heavily fallen state, one that exists in polar opposition to redemption. For Jennifer Beste, trauma seems to jeopardize the possibility of salvation. She begins by asking, in a framework derived from Karl Rahner,⁵⁷

[I]f the heart of salvation includes a free response to God, and if severe trauma can make this impossible, what does this mean for theological anthropology—for our understanding of what it means to be a person called to say yes to God’s self-offer?⁵⁸

Grace offers a way to overcome “original sin and concupiscence,”⁵⁹ but Beste worries that this account dooms those whose affectsive and cognitive lives are burdened by traumatic experiences. Grace is not a single, simple thing: “All of our longings and most profound human experiences reflect God’s gracious self-communication.”⁶⁰ Still, one’s ability to perceive and respond to both internal and external divine calls may be hampered by trauma. Its impact “on a person’s sense of self, freedom, and relationality” presents heavy and uneven barriers to those living under its effects.⁶¹

There is a tension in Beste’s work between a valorization of autonomy and the need for community. A key problem for Beste is distinguishing autonomous desires for heteronomous ones that are put in place by trauma and internalized oppression. Such judgments are, for her, nonetheless crucial. It is important to gauge whether or not a

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⁵⁷ Rahner’s theology, in turn, borrows from Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Søren Kirkegaard in holding that each person has “the freedom and responsibility” to accept God’s grace and live according to love of God and others [Jennifer Beste, God and the Victim: Traumatic Intrusions on Grace and Freedom (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 8-9].
⁵⁸ Beste, 9.
⁵⁹ Ibid., 23; see also p.31.
⁶⁰ Ibid., 23.
⁶¹ Ibid., 35.
person who has experienced trauma retains the “autonomy skills” to make adequate judgments about “what is good and fulfilling in her life.” Beste means to call the (Catholic, in this case) Church to action by disrupting the complacent assumption that God will attend to those who are harmed and that their “fundamental option to love God and neighbor” will be uninterrupted. She strives for a theological notion of human freedom that accounts for the ways that God’s grace flows through interpersonal relationships. Love of one’s neighbor is collaboration with God’s love, and thus one’s church (or Church) community has a key role in “making present the reality of salvation effected by Christ.” Beste levels important critiques of religious communities’ tendencies to withdraw from confronting sexual abuse, the form of trauma that she takes as paradigmatic and primarily addresses. Her claim that “interpersonal harm can destroy a person’s ability to respond freely to God’s grace” is a call to interpersonal responsibility.

Beste urges the Church to stand against social norms that consider incest private and an uncomfortable subject for communal discussion. She is also concerned about the ways in which sexism and abuse can infiltrate consciousness and shape desire. Yet Beste aligns spiritual salvation with attainment of liberal selfhood and functioning within society as it stands. Healing is what realigns a person with a social world, and requires the abilities and capacities that enable well-adjusted functioning in daily life. She determines that the goal for trauma survivors is to build or restore the “autonomy

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62 Ibid., 81.
63 Ibid., 112.
64 Ibid., 109-10.
65 Ibid., 111-2.
66 Ibid., 127.
competency” that, combined with values such as “self-respect and self-worth,”67 will make free choice with respect to one’s ultimate destiny possible.

An empowered agent with “self-coherency and self-continuity” is an ideal produced by “values directly derived from dominant Western social discourses,” and this is what Beste thinks a survivor would ideally become. She critiques Judith Butler for ostensibly ‘celebrating’ a fragmented self with limited conscious capacities.68 With the stated goal of “recovery and full reengagement with daily life,” Beste deems it clinically proven that trauma survivors need to experience themselves as cohesive, effective agents.69 She equates this state of agency with the one required for accepting divine love and grace.

This equation of conformity to cultural norms with salvific eligibility poses further theological question: Is social recognition, or human recognition more generally, the same as recognition by God? Are those who are most able to move easily and confidently through a hierarchical, violent world divinely privileged or selected? I think that Beste would want to respond negatively to these questions, but I do not know how to square that impulse with her equation of social functioning with eligibility for salvation.

The very situations with which she is most concerned involve exploitation of those who cannot be autonomous (children) by those with greater power and agency (adult relatives and clergy). Having demonstrated how misguided human patterns of recognition can be—their tendency to favor silence, perpetrators, and maintaining status quo power

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67 Ibid., 82.
68 This is, in my reading, a rather serious misinterpretation of Butler, for whom subjective fragmentation and opacity are always connected to painful forms of precarity and vulnerability. See especially Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), and ________, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London, New York: Verso, 2004).
69 Ibid., 69-70.
relations—Beste would seem poised to reject normative notions of social well being. That she instead reinforces them would seem to work against the subjects with whose harm she is concerned.  

Cynthia Hess, like Beste, draws an explicit contrast between a desirable vision of selfhood and one that she attributes to postmodern and poststructuralist thinkers. And she further generalizes this orientation as belonging to scholars of trauma: “Unlike poststructuralists, trauma scholars thus articulate a normative vision of the self.” This ideal or normative self “has a certain integrity” characterized by health and stability. A non-traumatized self is also “well-functioning,” meaning that it is capable of smoothly navigating daily life situations. As Hess envisions it,

(S)elves that are whole or coherent can act as intentional agents, establish solid interpersonal relationships, feel physically safe in their surroundings, and create ongoing personal narratives of particular events and experiences.

Trauma erodes these capabilities, and healing from trauma demands reintegration of the shattered self. While fragmentation can never be vanquished from human experience, healing from trauma demands that it be “transformed” in a process that reintegrates the self to the fullest extent possible.

There is a critique here of interpersonal behavior that mirrors the broader systemic analysis that Hess presents. Hess notes that many trauma survivors have God-images that correspond to abusers, and argues that there is a necessary “correlation between our God-
images and human relationships.” She takes inspiration from Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder, for whom the Fall and redemption fundamentally relate to humanity’s relationship to “powers and principalities.” Powers have a wide and somewhat ambiguous definition in Yoder’s work, referring to both spiritual and institutional forces. They are created by God but, like humans themselves, exist in a fallen state with respect to God’s love and will.

The church, for Hess and Yoder, must exist in resistance and opposition to the powers that work destructively “to convince human beings that they are the ‘divine regents’ of the world.” In his death on the cross, Jesus contradicted the powers by subordinating himself to their injustice. His refusal to assent to their governance and ‘self-glorification’ demonstrated that their reach was not absolute. The cross is thus both model and justification for nonviolence. While Christian communities also contain sinful persons and power dynamics, commitment to discipleship and the help of the Holy Spirit offer opportunities for “egalitarian and reconciling relationships” that do not simply reproduce the workings of the powers of the world. The resurrection shows that “Christians can live according to the way of the cross with confidence that their actions will be vindicated in the end.” Hess begins with Yoder’s thinking on nonviolence to ask

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74 Ibid., 53.
75 Ibid., 57.
76 Ibid., 15-6.
77 Ibid., 17.
78 Ibid., 16-7.
79 Ibid., 19.
80 Ibid., 17.
how individuals and communities can transform violence that becomes embedded in their identities through trauma.  

This is a theological framework in which healing and redemption are connected but not equivalent. Healing that is interpersonally enabled is also the work of God, who “is the ground, support, and goal of human agency.” The Christian community expresses God’s grace and receives (rather than makes) meaning created by Jesus and the Holy Spirit. While God’s kingdom belongs to the future, it can be experienced in ‘signs’ and ‘foretastes’ that anticipate what this future will be like. The healing that occurs within Christian community that witnesses its members’ traumas allows all involved to participate in the ‘new social humanity’ that Jesus initiated in his life and death. To an individualized process of healing is added the possibility of participating in (re)forming communal identity.

Because Hess adopts Yoder’s structurally oriented view of sin, she is sympathetic to feminist critiques of the ways that clinical approaches to trauma can render an overly individualized view of social problems. She cites Maria P. P. Root and Laura S. Brown, both psychologists who argue that, “social inequalities create conditions that sanction traumatic violence and compound its effects.” Rather than pathologizing those who experience traumatic events or the cumulative effects of oppression-related stress that Root and Brown refer to as “insidious trauma,” they problematize the extent to which these forms of harm are normalized. The problem of trauma is not at its base a problem with traumatized people, and is often a consequence of interpersonal and structural

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81 Ibid., 28.  
82 Ibid., 123.  
83 Ibid., 124.  
84 Ibid., 125.  
85 Ibid., 135.
modes of harm and injustice. At the same time, those who have never experienced identifiable traumatic events may nonetheless carry symptoms of trauma. This sort of ‘indirect trauma’ has to do with an anticipatory fear and anxiety that subjects who know they could be targeted for violence constantly carry with them.\textsuperscript{86}

While Hess does not integrate these insights fully into her theological paradigm, she plants resources for questioning an argument about salvation such as Beste’s. Why should we assume that the salvation of a traumatized person is in special jeopardy, when the forces that traumatized her are where we ought to locate sin? A related, though more subtle question, could also be raised about Hess’s declaration that trauma causes the person struggling with it to become a ‘site of violence.’\textsuperscript{87}

Serene Jones notes that feminist accounts of selfhood are not univocal, and delineates some of the quandaries that their tensions present for theology about trauma. On the one hand, there is the image of an able, productive ‘self as agent’ who is capable and deserving of choosing her own destiny. Then, there is the notion of a relational, caring self whose awareness of others’ needs is both a moral high ground and an indictment of pretenses to self-sufficiency. Finally, there is a post-structural, destabilized subject whose self is multiple, fluid, and welcoming of difference.\textsuperscript{88} Jones claims that none of these versions of selfhood is fully supportive of a traumatized person, even though all serve helpful and necessary functions.

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 38-40.
\textsuperscript{87} This is a complex issue in Hess’s work because internalized violence, which includes systemic violence (commonly referred to as internalized oppression), is both very real and a matter of misidentification. That is, trauma can cause people to experience violence \textit{as if it were} internal, but there is the sense that the violence truly arises from and belongs elsewhere.
\textsuperscript{88} Serene Jones, \textit{Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World} (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 141-2.
In the context of writing about reproductive loss, Jones advocates adding a different conception of the self, what she calls “the aesthetic drama of the self.”\textsuperscript{89} New considerations enter into a theological view of the self in this context—the importance of considering “audience” in constructing theological accounts, the desire for “an image” that may be informed by doctrine but is more than doctrine, and the role of imagination in telling and retelling stories that can bring meaning and comfort.\textsuperscript{90} Imaginative agency is both divine and human: “If grace has power to reshape the imagination, then theology is the language that both describes that power and evokes it in the lives of people by telling grace-filled stories of new imaginings.”\textsuperscript{91} Jones engages in storytelling and “reflections” because, she argues, both trauma and “the healing power of grace” occur in irreducibly particular ways that vary between people and situations.\textsuperscript{92} Many of Jones’ chapters begin with personal narratives that outline theological problems, and others are experiments in scripturally inspired, fictional storytelling.

There is a sense that gesturing toward possibilities and sources of grace cannot be done in a systematic way, but “…might be better served…by poetry, a gappy, airy, disjunctive, associative genre” that can hold grief and uncertainty alongside hope.\textsuperscript{93} Hess similarly notes the importance of imagination in the process of healing, a flexibility in thought that allows one to think that the future could be different from the past.\textsuperscript{94} Rambo also relies heavily on telling and retelling biblical and contemporary stories,

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 143.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 146-50.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 21-2.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 22.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., xiv.
\textsuperscript{94} Hess, 132-3.
imaginatively constructing the terrain on which one can remain as a witness to what is incomprehensible.

There is a more redemptive pull in Jones than in Rambo, the bold notion that theology can assist us with reintegrating the self, getting us beyond what seem to be impasses in thought and feeling: “theology’s task is to renarrate to us what we have yet to imagine.” Yet both Jones and Rambo are invested in creative, aesthetic, and at times poetic responses to trauma. They favor poetic forms for both representing and responding to trauma, as being able to accommodate uncertainty and lack of coherence, and as potential resources for healing. I will return to questions about what kinds of writing can portray trauma, provide redress, or constitute valuable modes of working through experiences and symptoms return in the final chapter’s discussion of ‘aesthetic education.’

The works discussed above are not the only theological texts on trauma. I choose to examine these particular writings because they both use the term trauma as the central nexus for study and foreground questions about theology’s relationship to social and political arenas. There are others that revolve around theology and trauma but with less attention to the broader dynamics that shape both doctrine and traumatic experience. Trauma has also begun to gain currency in biblical scholarship. In a much more

95 Jones, 21.
96 Dirk G. Lang, *Trauma Recalled: Liturgy, Disruption, and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010); Marcus Pound, *Theology, Psychoanalysis, and Trauma* (London: SCM Press, 2007). This is admittedly an oversimplification of both of these works, and I would leave open the question of how far each might be amenable to an analysis of power and oppression.
97 See Eve-Marie Becker, Jan Dochhorn, and Else Kragelund Holt, eds., *Trauma and Traumatization in Individual and Collective Dimensions: Insights from Biblical Studies and Beyond* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht GmbH and Co., 2014); Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette, eds., *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma* (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2016); Mark Brett, *Political Trauma and Healing: Biblical Ethics for a Postcolonial World*
numerous set of theological writings, trauma is clearly present but is not the organizing term, often not even a keyword for its author or primary interlocutors. This is particularly true of theologies written by women of color, which raises the important question of why parallel conversations seem to be happening about deeply related phenomena. This disconnection points to problems that will reemerge in each chapter of this dissertation.

To what forms of humanity and suffering does the concept of trauma most readily attach, and what do we make of its apparent limitations? Does the tendency to align trauma with undeserved suffering block its association with those who are not normative pictures of innocence? Should the goal be to expand our recognition of trauma, to temper its often broad and imprecise deployment, or some more complex alternation between such moves?

I will, for now, offer the preliminary observation that a focus on trauma is quite broad—if not universal, then also non-specific in ways that are apt to default to privileging categories of persons and experience often considered to be unmarked: male, white, heterosexual, affluent, non-disabled. While I do think that trauma can be deployed in meaningful ways to advocate for non-hegemonic, non-dominant subjects, I also think it

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98 The sources are too many to list. Some recent works that I have found particularly helpful to think with are M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010); Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015); and Wonhee Anne Joh, *The Heart of the Cross: A Postcolonial Christology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006). Delores Williams was one of the first thinkers I encountered who moved me to want to study theology, and her *Sisters in the Wilderness* is a founding text for womanist Christianity. Her critique of surrogate, redemptive suffering has stayed with me and was one of the background impulses behind my beginning to look critically at accounts of trauma that seemed to justify or trivialize oppression by focusing on the individual’s path to salvation [Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993, 2013).
is important to do so with recognition that trauma may not be interpreted the same way across all subjectivities and social locations. Labeling something trauma, that is, cannot itself undo racism or ableism or sexism.

I want to return to Jones in *Trauma and Grace*, to register particular concern about her account of sin. Because falling and the Fall play such a heavy role in how trauma is theorized in non-theological contexts, I find it both fascinating and troubling that Jones locates traumatized persons in a state of alienation from God. Like Beste, Jones focuses on the particular barriers to grace that trauma would seem to present.

[I]t becomes difficult for victims to experience the healing power of God’s grace because their internal capacities (where one knows and feels) have been broken. It is hard to know God when your knowing faculties have been disabled. It is hard to feel divine love when your capacity to feel anything at all has been shut down.99

This is not merely a manifestation of the pattern Root and Brown name, in which traumatized persons are seen primarily as sites of damage and deficit (although it is certainly that). Jones associates trauma with alienation from God, a state of non-awareness of “God’s love and desire for the flourishing of creation.”100 While she insists that it is important not to mobilize sin against people who are already marginalized or in pain, Jones does not see people distanced from God by trauma as innocent. She remarks that, “there is no knowledge of sin apart from a prior knowledge of grace,”101 which implies that this grace remains available even when it feels otherwise. There is a seeming contradiction in claiming that trauma imposes a barrier to grace and that those who cannot access grace are in a sinful state.

99 Jones, viii-ix.
100 Ibid., 102.
101 Ibid.
My larger concern is that this is how trauma theory also functions: Those exposed to danger and harm are fallen, which renders them a form of humanity gone wrong. Judith Herman assumes that trauma survivors are in this state until they have undergone an arduous process of recovery. Separated from both human fulfillment and (awareness of) divine grace, they cannot be sites of knowledge, creativity, valid critique, or beauty. This extends from individuals to those a society marks as sanctioned for harm, exclusion, even death. The fourth chapter’s discussion of bare life and its leanings toward racialized and gendered definitions of the Human explores some of the theoretical dimensions of this problem.

Creativity is an ambiguous resource for Jones, one able to turn attention toward or away from God. Imagination is suspect to the extent that it might be “used to construct fantasy worlds rather than to imagine a world that embodies God’s glory.” Yet when used in faithful alignment with God’s purposes, humans have the opportunity to participate in co-creating beauty and flourishing. This anxiety about fantasy, its intuited privileging of human over divine desires, seems on the one hand to belong squarely to the Reformed and Calvinist worldview within which Jones operates. In the final chapter, however, I too will call into question the tendency to assume that artistic and literary responses to trauma are intrinsically more responsible, adequate, or ethical than theory. Such works, and the artists themselves, are capable of adding to injustice as well as combatting it. The experimental writers whose work that chapter finds most compelling are those who question and critique artistic methods not only on the basis of their creative principles, but with an eye to their works’ effects. I argue that theory is in

102 Ibid., 105.
103 Ibid., 103-5.
need of similar practices for recording its experiments in realms of ambivalence, particularly regarding questions about its own social and political efficacy.

_Falling into Life: Flora Keshgegian and Sharon Betcher_

There are, significantly, theologians who argue directly against deploying the Fall to explain or interpret violence and suffering. Flora Keshgegian, a feminist theologian whose family survived the Armenian genocide, argues that there is “no room for naïvete or innocence” in responses to memories of violence and victimization.\(^{104}\) Christians must account for the fact that their religion can both oppress and liberate, that it has been persecuted and an instrument of persecution.\(^{105}\) Following Johannes Metz, Keshgegian asserts the need to view oneself, the church, and the broader culture “through the eyes of our victims.”\(^{106}\) Keshgegian declines to have the traumas with which she identifies take exclusive precedence, and gives constant recognition that “uniqueness may be plural.”\(^{107}\) She also insists that, while it is crucial to center victims, this principle can become a trap in which one has to disclaim all agency in order to be recognized as suffering.\(^{108}\) Redemption, in such a doctrine, somehow requires undeserved suffering, which easily rationalizes oppression for the sake of personal or collective eschatological ends.\(^{109}\)

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\(^{105}\) Keshgegian emphasizes that any encounter with the Holocaust entails actively dealing with Christian anti-Semitism, even as a certain empathetic understanding is possible for Armenian Christians (86).

\(^{106}\) Ibid., 135. This is one of the reasons that memory is so important for Keshgegian, even as she realizes that memory can be both a problem and a resource (16-7).

\(^{107}\) Ibid., 69.

\(^{108}\) Ibid., 140.

\(^{109}\) This is one of Delores Williams’ key claims about how black women have been made to stand in substitutionary atonement for the sins of (especially white) humanity (See _Sisters in the Wilderness_, cited above).
Keshgegian’s goal is not to redeem trauma, but to revalue life in a way that might redeem Christianity. While there is a frequent tendency to find trauma at the core of theological narratives and identity, she argues that healing Christianity means centering trauma. The cross, for Keshgegian, is not a redeemable or redemptive event, and trauma itself cannot be accepted as a necessary or given part of human existence. Trauma cannot simply be discarded, and continues to pulse underneath “ongoing life,” but it is not in itself the locus of theological significance. The focus ought instead to be on survivors’ “acts of resistance and resilience,” and the ways that life manages to continue even when death is tremendously powerful. Even traumatized responses are fundamentally ways to keep living through what seems unliveable; even remembrance that clings to past trauma “is a form of desire for life.” To love life means to admit its finitude, to overcome an “incarnational aversion” that is part of so much of western Christianity, and to realize that life does not need a larger telos or justification. The Fall, as well as the original perfection imagined behind it, is simply unhelpful. We instead need ways of appreciating and loving life that is never perfect, that contains overwhelming degrees of loss, change, and contingency.

For Sharon Betcher, who reads Christian theology through the lens of disability, the Fall stands stubbornly against life as it ought to be lived and loved. She names a drift “toward salvation as well-being in late modernity” that associates struggle against sin

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111 Ibid., 196.
114 Ibid., 179-80.
115 Ibid., 152, 156-7.
with “the culling out of defect.” Betcher issues a strong rejoinder to the assumption (similar to the one held by Beste and Hess above) that spiritual health should manifest as fitting into society. Redemption has come to mean “wholeness, fulfillment, perfection” on terms set by colonialist capitalism. This leads to a pervasive ‘fear of falling’ that stigmatizes persons whose bodies visibly depart from idealized forms. Betcher argues that a corresponding “aversion to pain” is, implicitly but unavoidably, “a fear of being alive in the world, a fear I believe to be culturally more pervasive than the fear of death.” Casting disability as fallen allows ‘normates’ not to acknowledge their own anxieties, bodily and moral.

The Fall is thus complicit in denying ableist oppression and projecting death onto disability (or disability as a kind of death). The Augustinian version of the Fall habituates western Christians in particular to see suffering and death as unnatural. In modern terms, this has become “the shorthand hermeneutic of brokenness versus wholeness,” read automatically onto bodies whose difference registers as deficit. Betcher urges a new theology of Spirit that would cease longing for a perfect world, “making each person accountable for carrying the psychic weight of their own mortality.” To lose innocence, in Betcher’s account, is to relinquish belief in “reasonable proportions” and “causal relations” with regard to suffering. There is no calculability that can measure sin and luck and demonstrate a reasonable correspondence. One can only find sustaining

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118 Ibid., 39.
119 Ibid., 41.
120 Ibid., 18.
121 Ibid., VII, 198.
122 Ibid., 195. See also p.199.
enjoyment and “trust in life” once one stops expecting that life—especially its
distributions of suffering and pain—will be fair and explicable.123

Both Betcher and Keshgegian are thinkers of immanence and embodiment. The
idealism that comes with redemptive and eschatological thinking leads us to disparage
life as we actually live it. Keshgegian suggests that, “Maybe we need to forgo heaven, to
find home on earth.”124 Their rejection of the Fall as an ethical theological way of seeing
foreshadows many of the points I will raise in non-theological realms. How does the
notion of life that is somehow below an ideal state come to shape perceptions of subjects
and bodies? How do anticipations of redemption serve to devalue people as they are in
the present? How is the Fall unevenly projected in ways correlated with structures of
privilege and oppression, and what moralized stigmas follow from these associations?

Method and Map

In early close readings of Herman and Caruth, thinkers credited as foundational for
trauma studies, I first noticed that an abundance of theological terms and images
appeared in their texts—references to transcendence, redemption, exorcism, and falling.
It was when I began to pursue the parallels between formulations of trauma and bare life
as theorized by Giorgio Agamben that I saw the central role of something that resembled
the Fall or original sin in all three works. This dissertation does not unilaterally condemn
that fact, but it persistently asks what structuring assumptions the Fall embeds as a logic
deployed to make sense of violence, suffering, ethics, and identity.

A key tactic for my work has been to think about what it means that theory—and
this would include theology—is performative. These texts that have, in two and half short

123 ibid., 194-5.
124 Keshgegian, Time for Hope, 124.
decades, become ‘classics’ can easily be mistaken for static objects. In order to counteract this tendency, I repeatedly ask what it means that reading and writing are both embodied acts. This takes up the question of the distance between theory and practice and reframes its concerns. One does not need to wonder whether theory does anything, but rather to ask how it is wielded, and to what effects.

The most important critical precursors to the current project are examinations of trauma theory that foreground issues of race and colonialism. It is here that authors have insistently pressed questions about whether trauma’s construction as a concept posits a normative version of ‘the human.’ Whether they wish to moderate the use of trauma as a framework for understanding harm and injustice, to spread recognition of trauma to those who have not traditionally been recognized as legitimate victims, or a more cautious combination of both measures, these authors enhance and clarify the concerns behind my inquiry into trauma’s frequent portrayal as a/the Fall.125 These works have appeared over the course of this dissertation’s writing, and I have been reenergized many times by their reassuring resonances, necessary disruptions, and poignant redirections. I do not presume to go beyond these theories, but see this dissertation as working in tandem with them. My avenues of questioning are not superior; they are an experiment with what comes into view from a particular angle of approach.

An especially close traveling companion in this area of inquiry is Debarati Sanyal’s *Memory and Complicity*.\(^{126}\) Sanyal looks to postwar French writings and films about the Holocaust that do not seek to singularize its memory but to connect it to violence and struggles associated with colonialism. She finds in Alain Resnais, Jean Cayrol, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus that ‘multidirectional memory’ operates across “sites, temporalities, and communities.”\(^{127}\) Like this dissertation, Sanyal’s monograph puts discourses on trauma that descend from Holocaust memory studies into conversation with Giorgio Agamben’s account of bare life. Her account of “collective memory as a productive rather than privative process,” and her recognition that this can lead to “collisions and conflations” as well as solidarity are points that resonate strongly with my own concerns.\(^{128}\)

For Sanyal, it is imperative to move discursive focus away from the category of trauma, which too easily lends itself to appropriations of victimhood that end up justifying new forms of violence.\(^{129}\) A focus on complicity “rather than shame or trauma” could generate commitment to “contest ongoing injustice.”\(^{130}\) Complicity foregrounds analyses of positionality and relationality—it can, in addition to sharing in guilt, indicate simply that one is involved and complex, ‘folded together’ with the events in question.\(^{131}\)

Sanyal regards reflection on complicity as crucial for reframing issues that have

\(^{129}\) Ibid., 8.
\(^{130}\) Ibid., 12.
\(^{131}\) Sanyal notes that *complicare*, the latin root from which complicity comes, means ‘to fold together’ (10).
frequently been approached with vocabularies of affect such as trauma and melancholy. While I remain largely within the domain of discourse about trauma, I am interested in all of the forms of complicity Sanyal identifies, and perhaps most of all in our frequent difficulty telling them apart.

The three central chapters of this dissertation look at how falling and the Fall appear in theorizations of trauma and extremity. Psychiatrist Judith Herman does not identify her work as religious in any way, nor does she connect her use of words like transcendence or exorcism to specific religious traditions. Yet her description of trauma’s shattering, alienating impact separates the suffering person from a naturalized vision of subjective and social existence. Healing requires, in Herman’s account, belief in a prescribed method of healing that can enable transcendence and redemption.

I read Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery* for what it says about trauma and memory, but also for its broader philosophical arguments about worthy and ideal forms of human existence. Recovery from trauma restores the potential for virtue, an alignment that parallels the logics found in Beste and Jones’ theologies. It is, moreover, the therapist who has privileged ability to detect this condition’s presence or absence. The clinician who is fully with and for the victim is seen as only witnessing, never shaping, the story that is told. She is also an irreproachable agent of social justice.

Among the theological echoes in Herman’s theory is a dualistic alignment of trauma with evil and recovery with what is good. Evil is a category of emptiness and meaninglessness, aligned with trauma’s inability to be cognitively processed. I

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132 The question of whether complicity might be or represent a form of fallenness arises in the third chapter.
133 Herman, 263.
134 Ibid., 155, 178.
problematize the way that Herman makes trauma itself an instrument of moral arbitration, which elides both perpetrators’ trauma and victims’ subjective complexities. Herman at times aligns uncertainty itself with evil, which frames attempts to question her claims as morally and politically subversive. At the same time, the conditions she posits as ideal for healing are unavailable to many socially vulnerable persons (those for whom attaining a routine sense of safety, for instance, might be impossible). Privilege and morality are subtly but unmistakably joined in this account of recovery.

My reading of Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience* focuses on a curious chapter at the center of the book, one that does not mention trauma at all. Instead, Caruth creatively interprets Paul de Man’s portrayal of theory as a form of falling. I argue that what is sometimes read as Caruth’s universalization of trauma is really her attempt to attune readers to shared vulnerability. I connect Caruth’s account with Felman’s essay on Camus’ novel *The Fall*, where falling represents complicity and the lost possibility of redemption. The partially submerged argument of her chapter on de Man is that both potential for traumatization and an inability to be the witness that is needed are unavoidable aspects of embodied, relational life.

Unfortunately for the social and political ends Caruth has in mind, these (true) generalizations are not supplemented with an analysis of how people or groups become unequally exposed to particular kinds of violence. Caruth presents helpful methods for remembering that theorizing is an embodied act, subject to the mortality and imperfections that come with any human performance. These efforts are worthy of more appreciation and attention than they often receive by those who dismiss Caruth’s work.

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for ostensibly making all of life trauma(tic). Yet trauma seems to be an external force that comes from nowhere, that cannot be prevented. Metaphorically aligned with gravity, trauma’s pull is untraceable to human acts and decisions.

It is one thing to emphasize that violence cannot be undone, another to accede to ways of doing theory that make it seem necessary or inevitable. Yet I would read Caruth as at least partly foretelling the limitations of her own work, and attempt to resist overly moralistic claims about her ‘real’ concerns or loyalties. I worry instead about how theoretical constructions shape our ways of seeing and inhabiting the world. Does Caruth’s fixation on the position of witness allow that the witness might be actively contributing to conditions and forces that cause trauma? Does determination to awaken the witness, to keep trying to get this (affective, political, or interpersonal) response right, take insufficient account of victims and survivors of trauma, whose experiences may be entirely different?

The final author whose account of falling receives close reading in this dissertation is Giorgio Agamben. While not exactly a trauma theorist, his figure of bare life, or homo sacer, is another mode of thinking about how subjectivity is configured (or perhaps, for him, deformed) in situations of extremity and violence. Bare life, or *nuda vita*, aligns the nakedness of exposure to harm with original sin. While Agamben critiques and sets out to undo these associations, his tangled exploration of the sadistic desire to see others ‘bared’ suggests that the agential subject at the center of his theory is implicitly raced and gendered.

I engage Alexander Weheliye’s critiques of Agamben, in particular his argument that Agamben fantasizes bare life as existing “above and beyond” race and racial
inequality. While I attempt to give a sympathetic reading of Agamben that complicates these claims, I do find that he elides the biopolitical operation of race in ways that mostly align with Weheliye’s claims. I read Sylvia Wynter, to whom Weheliye also turns, and highlight her theorization of racism as inheriting the structure of original sin. According to Wynter, fallenness became eugenically theorized dysselection, and thus Race became God. 

In the final chapter, I follow a thread of theory about aesthetics that begins in Caruth’s readings of Paul de Man, who in turn is writing about Friedrich Schiller—an admittedly odd starting point for decolonial analysis. A ‘sabotage’ of Schiller is nonetheless the framing that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak gives to her own explorations of ‘aesthetic education.’ Fiction offers, according to Spivak, a space for reworking ideological ruts, for opening up epistemological flexibility that will enable one to perceive and engage more ethically and democratically with human differences. I read an experimental creative text, Ban en Banlieue by Bhanu Kapil, beside Spivak’s essays for the questions their juxtaposition raises about the possible relationships between social violence and its intimate experience, efforts for political liberation and personal healing.

I argue, first and foremost, that trauma as a concept is incapable of setting moral categories and ensuring solidarity across gulfs in experience and identity. The recurrence of falling and fallenness in theories of trauma and bare life is not evidence that the Fall is ‘really there’ so much as a reminder that the Fall derives its intuitiveness from

performative repetition. That the Fall or something resembling the Fall exists within trauma seems truthful and obvious because of their frequent and variable association. While I do think that trauma can be a useful category for describing harm and advocating redress, I would urge consistent attention to who wields the term, and how.

I argue, in short, that common uses of trauma and the Fall overdetermine which phenomena are recognizable as harm and suffering. I see in the awkward combining of Spivak and Kapil’s texts gestures toward aesthetic interventions that mean to disrupt these habits of perception. This work would contribute to elaborating what Wynter calls different genres of the human, ways of being human and recognizing the human that would encompass life and love as well as trauma and death.
‘Un imaginable boundaries’

Chapter 2

Power, Performance, and Trauma’s Claims to Justice:
Reading Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery*

Preface: Hysteria and Heroism

In Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery*, Bertha Pappenheim is an inspirational trauma victim who recovered and went on to empowered feminist leadership. A brilliant writer, translator, social worker, and movement builder, she spent her professional life advocating transnationally for Jewish women.¹ Pappenheim is also, of course, Anna O., the pseudonymous founding patient of psychoanalysis who coined the phrase ‘the talking cure’ to describe its method. Harold Ticktin celebrates her trajectory in similar fashion, “Thus it is that a proper Viennese Jewess appears in history at the end of the 19th century as a patient in the foundational case of psychoanalysis and then reappears in the 20th century as a heroine in the struggle against white slavery.”²

Through finely detailed archival research, Elizabeth Ann Loentz has demonstrated that Pappenheim’s concerns about white slavery were moral and political, a dense combination of altruism and sociological calculation. The effort to protect both German and Eastern European Jewish women under the banner of fighting white slavery was, at

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least in part, an attempt to situate Jews as white at a time when their racial status was dangerously contested.\(^3\) White slavery was an abomination largely because of the putative whiteness of its victims,\(^4\) and its use to signal Jewish women’s exploitation was an assertion of European belonging.

Efforts to improve Eastern European Jewish women’s status were largely assimilatory with regard to both culture and religion. Loentz argues that social services provided by German Jewish feminists were, at least in part, animated by a prevalent fear that Eastern European Jewish immigration might undermine German Jews’ hard-won social status. Stereotypes abounded of Eastern European Jews as inferior (dirty, lazy), immoral (prostitutes and pimps), and inadequately civilized.\(^5\) Social services were both means of uplift and a mode of distinguishing philanthropic civilized Jews from the Eastern European ‘barbarians;’ they affirmed German Jews’ identification with Germanness even as they were avenues of Jewish solidarity. Middle class Jewish women found in social work and advocacy opportunities to attain professional status and engage in a larger political world.\(^6\)

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\(^3\) Elizabeth Ann Loentz, “Negotiating Identity: Bertha Pappenheim (Anna O.) as German-Jewish Feminist, Social Worker, Activist, and Author” (PhD diss, The Ohio State University, 1999). Loentz reports that, “In 1927 Pappenheim vigorously protested a League of Nations report on white slavery in which Eastern European Jews involved in the white slave trade were listed as Jews, whereas their Catholic and Protestant counterparts were listed only by nationality” (133).

\(^4\) The rhetorical and political uses of white slavery served diverse ends. Among them, “Early-twentieth-century anti-vice campaigns played a critical role in creating racial hierarchy and demarcating racial and ethnic boundaries.” Whiteness was an unstable category which these discourses helped to consolidate and define. [Brian Donovan, *White Slave Crusades: Race, Gender, and Anti-vice Activism, 1887-1917* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 2-6.]

\(^5\) Loentz, 144-8.

\(^6\) Ibid., 144-8, 160. Stereotypes that applied to Eastern European Jews often applied to Eastern Europeans more generally, and were not absolute. In writing about the Russian pogroms, Pappenheim unambiguously contrasts the barbarity of the perpetrators with the dignified humanity of their victims (151).
Pappenheim steadily insisted that Eastern European Jews’ inferiority was due to economic and educational deprivation and could be remedied by social and religious intervention. She thus refused biologistic racial logics which were popular at the time, and accompanying notions of hereditary or intrinsic deficiency. Pappenheim furthermore considered the lives and futures of European Jews to be both politically and spiritually important for the worldwide survival of Jewish people. Like many German Jews who experienced anti-Semitism’s rise during World War I, she regarded Western and Eastern European Jewish destinies as mutually intertwined.

Pappenheim was simultaneously a bold advocate for women’s equality and a proponent of rather conservative religious and family values. Her Isenburg home for women took in unwed mothers and other ‘endangered girls’ of both German and non-German backgrounds. Material support was provided alongside immersive religious education. The home’s residents, as conditions of their stay, observed orthodox ritual practice, received Hebrew instruction, and celebrated the Sabbath. Pappenheim was outspoken about the needs and vulnerabilities of illegitimate, neglected, and abandoned children; she consistently urged that they ought to be supported by both state programs and Jewish philanthropy. At the same time, she aimed to reshape women and children in desperate situations according to her own moral and religious ideals, requiring their

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7 Ibid., 152.
8 Ibid., 153-7.
9 This is not to deny or downplay Pappenheim’s internal critiques of Orthodox Jewish structures and practices, which were many. In addition to protesting sexual hierarchies, for instance, Pappenheim argued that Orthodox communities tended to isolate themselves too much from the rest of the cultural world in areas like education and the arts (119).
10 Ibid., 115, 117.
11 Ibid., 110-1. Loentz demonstrates that Pappenheim felt especial rivalry with the Catholic Church, which would accept illegitimate children turned away by Jewish organizations. Their social services were lifted up as models to both emulate and counter (113-4).
compliance in exchange for assistance. She vigorously promoted the nuclear family, opposed abortion, and was disillusioned by many Zionists’ lack of religious commitment, as well as their lack of concern about prostitution and white slavery.\textsuperscript{12}

To point out the conservatism of Pappenheim’s views is not to discount her feminism, only to specify its type. She voiced persistent critiques of women’s inferior status within Jewish life and European society more broadly. Within religious community, she was concerned that patriarchal structures and norms were driving women away—sometimes to Christian conversion, and in extreme cases into socially marginal locations such as prostitution.\textsuperscript{13} Early 20\textsuperscript{th} century Zionism was, for Pappenheim, not invested enough in women’s rights, even as she held out hope that it could provide refuge from religious persecution for Eastern European Jews.

Beneath the vaulted image of the empowered former hysteric, then, lies a more complex—in many ways more human—flawed historical actor. Pappenheim simultaneously held attitudes of condescension and solidarity, colonizer style dominance and liberatory desires toward the women she set out to help. Her social and political work did endeavor to aid sexually exploited women,\textsuperscript{14} but her actions did not therefore or in all cases promote justice. The submerged difficulties and entanglements in this exemplary

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 82-3, 88-9. Another possible reason Pappenheim did not invest in the Zionism of the early 1900s, Loentz argues, was her belief in “German-Jewish symbiosis.” This phrase refers to the sense that Germanness and Jewishness were so intricately intertwined that they were inseparable for German Jews, and for Germany as a nation (70-1). Whether this was a securely held belief or an aspirational one seems an open question.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 108, 116.

\textsuperscript{14} Although Herman’s narration will suggest otherwise, there is no straight line back to Pappenheim’s own trauma. While sexual abuse and incest were prominent themes (as fantasy or reality) in many of Freud’s hysteria cases, Breuer’s case study and Freud’s later interpretation locate Anna O.’s instigating traumatic occurrence in the illness and death of her father. See Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer, Studies in Hysteria, trans. Nicola Luckhurst (New York: Penguin Group, 2004).
trauma story point to the need to re-contextualize theories of trauma in larger fields of conflict and critique. As trauma theory in the 1990s and 21st century takes on a theologically resonant pattern of fall and redemption, it becomes both more difficult and more important to ask who is being cast as degraded, redeemed, or capable of redeeming others. There are racial, classed, and gendered contours to such judgments that are underappreciated in Herman’s highly influential and important work. To argue that her writing on trauma contains and refracts patterns of oppression and exclusion is not to thoroughly reject her work. It is, however, important to complicate Herman’s advocacy for trauma as a category that can move directly from intimate, personal harm to movement for social and political justice.

**Trauma’s Moral Frame**

In its Introduction, Judith Herman describes her work *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* as “a book about commonalities.” Beyond drawing analogies or parallels, Herman insists on an essential sameness to private and public suffering, female and male victims, domestic violence and military combat, women’s liberation and international human rights. This sameness is described as part discovery, part construction. Survivors of trauma display common symptoms, and face common obstacles to social recognition. Herman describes a ‘dialectic’ between “the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud.” These responses to trauma recur throughout history, under different circumstances and with variable vocabularies of injury and diagnosis. But Herman also

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15 Herman, *TR*, 3.
16 Ibid., 3-4.
17 Ibid., 1.
claims a constituting relationship to the category of trauma she puts forward: “I have tried to unify an apparently divergent body of knowledge and to develop concepts that apply equally to the experiences of domestic and sexual life…and to the experiences of war and political life.” In *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman seeks to observe unity and to unify. One of the present chapter’s aim will be to trace oscillations in Herman’s awareness of the performative functions of her rhetoric. As stated in the introduction, Herman sees trauma as an ever-present reality to be denied or discovered. I will demonstrate her consistent reluctance, and sometimes outright refusal, to identify her own practices as actively shaping the meaning and function of trauma in individual and cultural life.

While Herman takes an unapologetic and explicit feminist stance, it is not initially obvious why this would entail arguing for sameness between frequently (or, at least, stereotypically) gendered experiences. Her epigraph, an excerpt of the narrating voice in Salman Rushdie’s *Shame*, provides some clues. The narrator reflects that, having undertaken to tell “an almost excessively masculine saga,…the women seem to have taken over; they marched from the peripheries of the story to demand the inclusion of their own tragedies, histories, and comedies…” Women’s sides of the story reveal continuity more than difference, thus demonstrating mutually reinforcing forms of ideology-laden coercion:

Repression is a seamless garment; a society which is authoritarian in its social and sexual codes, which crushes its women beneath the intolerable burdens of honour and propriety, breeds repression of other kinds as well. Contrariwise: dictators are always—or at least in public, on other people’s behalf—puritanical. So it turns out that my “male” and “female” plots are the same story after all.

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18 Ibid., 4.
20 Ibid.
Interestingly, Rushdie here associates women’s oppression with sexual constraint, not abuse. The narrator bemoans a lack of liberal freedom that he observes in both public and private spaces. While they impact subjects in different and disparate ways, political and sexual repression are two prongs of the same dictatorial strategy. They aim to quell resistance in the name of morality, and to limit individual lives and choices for an ostensibly higher good. As M. Keith Booker observes, this critique is not a radical feminist analysis, but a rather palatable (by Western academic standards) humanist orientation.  

Herman’s feminist credentials and commitments are not in question. But by aligning trauma with oppression in general, and suggesting that oppression is basically the same phenomenon across social positions and circumstances, she sets dogmatic boundaries to her work’s capacity to recognize domination and harm. I emphasize theological resonances in her deployment of concepts like faith, transcendence, and redemption to illustrate how diagnostic and moral categories intertwine in Herman’s account. The category of trauma is imbued with the ability to reveal injustice and distinguish good from evil. I argue that, while injustice is indeed a frequent cause of trauma, and of persistent difficulties in recognizing trauma in stigmatized and subordinated persons and populations, the category of trauma cannot itself decide questions of responsibility or ethics.

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21 M. Keith Booker, “Beauty and the Beast: Dualism as Despotism in the Fiction of Salman Rushdie,” in Reading Rushdie: Perspectives on the Fiction of Salman Rushdie, ed. M. D. Fletcher (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), 252. There is also the possibility, though it is clearly not Herman’s intent, that the non-Muslim U.S. reader could interpret this quote to reinforce associations of repression with the religious and political Other.

22 The fact that Rushdie’s text uses the term “repression” instead of oppression is a happy coincidence for Herman, since it conjures myriad associations with trauma. But it seems that Rushdie’s narrator refers to limits on action (and perhaps thought), not limits on memory.
The equation of trauma with oppression and powerlessness is a key theme of this chapter. I argue that Herman’s allegiance to this notion, even when it stresses her clinical experience or the concrete examples she offers, serves an important discursive function. It elevates the survivor’s struggle, ameliorating isolation by making individual experiences part of important social causes. Recovery is triumph over evil, a restoration of meaning where it seemed to be shattered. The powerless survivor is necessarily innocent, she and those who come to her aid are in an irreproachable position. The survivor and the therapist (and thus Herman herself) must be assumed to have goodness, morality, and social justice on their side. These premises create a stark, dualistic framework that glosses over important questions about traumatization’s effects on moral decision-making, therapists’ influences on patients’ narratives, and the actual outcomes of political struggles that declare themselves to be against oppression.

Herman’s work is incredibly efficacious in portraying the terror and despair that abuse and violence can cause. She fights to counter-balance the ways in which sexist and domestic violence have often been trivialized and dismissed as private matters, their harms downplayed when acknowledged at all. Herman’s goal is not to sensationalize all-too-common pain, but to enable “a new, unstigmatized identity” for those whose

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23 Innocent and yet somehow fallen, as will become clear below. While the victim’s goodness and innocence are paramount for Herman, she also thinks that failure to work through and recover from traumatic experience can doom one to a debased existence. This sets her view of the trauma victim much closer to Serene Jones, her designation of trauma as a state of sin, than might be initially evident.

24 Herman draws, sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly from her background in working with adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Her 1981 *Father-Daughter Incest* argues that as studies began to demonstrate the prevalence of incest between fathers and daughters, there emerged in popular and academic spheres the excuses of the father, which are “first, he did no harm, and second, he is not to blame” [Judith Herman with Lisa Hirschman, *Father-Daughter Incest* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 22]. She cites efforts made to portray incest as “a positive and consensual experience” (23), and the cultural trope of “the Seductive Daughter” (36). Hereafter cited as Herman, *FDI*. 
suffering has been pathologized and ignored. The constructive aim of *Trauma and Recovery* is to garner recognition that victims of domestic violence and child sexual abuse experience something as serious and profound as veterans or survivors of terrorist attacks.

This argument has had a large and enduring clinical, academic, and social impact. Roger Luckhurst credits Judith Herman with having “fixed the diagnostic association of sexual abuse and trauma subjectivity.” Theologian Shelly Rambo claims that the publication of *Trauma and Recovery* “signaled, in many respects, the birth of modern trauma studies.” In 2008, the journal *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly* chose to devote one of their “Classics Revisited” sections to *Trauma and Recovery*. Respondents call Herman “one of the pioneering clinicians in the field [of trauma studies] as well as a major player in the theoretical debate,” and write that *Trauma and Recovery* “remains the standard reference point of trauma studies, providing a common language” for psychiatric and theoretical discussions. *Trauma and Recovery* is routinely assigned on graduate syllabi for social work and is the best known of Herman’s writings.

Perhaps it is all the more important, then, to ask who, precisely, is valorized by Herman’s insistent moral certainty. Who is protected, elevated, and affirmed when she attaches unquestionable righteousness to ‘trauma survivors’ and their advocates? I will first trace Herman’s account of trauma as a fall from a state of wholeness and faith, and

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28 Susan Rubin Suleiman, “Judith Herman and Contemporary Trauma Theory,” in *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly* 36:1&2 (Spring/Summer 2008), 276.
29 Jenna Appelbaum, “Trauma and Research: Bearing Responsibility and Witness,” in *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly* 36:1&2 (Spring/Summer 2008), 272.
the path to recovery that she sometimes refers to as redemptive. A key requirement in this process is that therapist and patient alike believe—first, in the reality of a past traumatic event, and secondly in the ability of truth-telling to heal and redeem. I will not attempt to weigh in on the efficacy of narrative therapies, though I will point to ongoing controversies about memory and the possibility of recovering past events. My larger concern is that the theologizing of trauma as deployed by Herman, which in this case represents a drive to make its claims universal and transcendent, seems to locate a certain version of feminist analysis—one with limitations shaped by race, class, and cultural context—beyond critique.

Fall and Redemption

Dominick LaCapra has repeatedly noted that many theories of trauma describe it as a fallen state, akin to biblical ejection from paradise. What may be unique about Herman’s thinking is the directness and non-equivocation with which she embraces this structure. Janice Haaken refers to the model of trauma Herman subscribes to as “an apocalyptic metapsychology” because it posits shattered subjectivity and sociality. Trauma, for Herman, constitutes a fall from a state of ‘faith’ and wholeness. Since she is mostly concerned with describing the fallen state, the posited state of original trust, control, and well-being can only be deduced by the retrospective sense of loss. One loses, for example, the ability to give an account of one’s life in a linear and narrative fashion.

30 I do not mean to suggest that it is characteristic of theological thinking to shut down critique. As I hope is clear from my introductory chapter, theology can be carried out with deep appreciation for its own social location and context.
Herman assumes here that “the ordinary memories of adults” are coded in coherent and integrated ways.\(^{33}\) One who has been traumatized feels helpless, and like the world in which he lives is unreliable.\(^{34}\)

The default condition, Herman implies, is a feeling that one is an empowered agent in a dependable and safe world. Assumptions about the victim’s initial or baseline state become more vivid in the following statement: “Traumatic events destroy the victim’s fundamental assumptions about the safety of the world, the positive value of the self, and the meaningful order of creation.”\(^{35}\) The so-called victim is posited as beginning with, not only positive ideas about her environment and herself, but a cosmology in which life and the world have intrinsic meaning. Herman even calls the violated sense of security a condition of faith. Referring to the conditions of early childhood, she writes, “Basic trust, acquired in the primary intimate relationship, is the foundation of faith.” The ‘faith’ referenced in this sentence has a rather vague object, but it is clearly aligned in the context of Herman’s text with “belief in a meaningful world.”\(^{36}\)

Though this starting point is portrayed as typical, Herman admits that original wholeness is not universally available. Abused children, in particular, may have never experienced the conditions that she posits as a baseline for those who undergo trauma only as adults. Herman states that a survivor of child abuse has often grown up seeing herself “as outside the compact of ordinary human relations, as supernatural creatures or nonhuman life forms.”\(^{37}\) Notably, an ordered and meaningful world still exists in a

\(^{33}\) Herman, *TR*, 37.
\(^{34}\) Ibid., 47.
\(^{35}\) Ibid., 51.
\(^{36}\) Ibid., 54.
\(^{37}\) Ibid., 105.
hypothetical sense, for others. But one’s own personality is experienced as fragmented and insignificant, even evil.\(^{38}\)

From her analysis of child abuse and its aftermath, it is clear that Herman’s posited pre-trauma state is not a given, but the outcome of relatively safe and attended childhood. Thus, her account of fall and redemption is anchored in a developmental view of individuals’ histories rather than a broader account of human or world history. Nonetheless, Herman’s work possesses the notion that living with unhealed trauma violates a universal human potential. One who suffers in this state is “condemned to a diminished life.”\(^{39}\) While many Christian theological accounts presume that all people have fallen, for Herman it is not inevitable that any one becomes a victim of trauma. Yet the fall, when it occurs, is just as decisive, inflecting all future prospects for relationality and experience.

Herman takes an explicitly theological turn in talking about survivors who endure forms of captivity that cause them to feel less than human. She writes, “These profound alterations in the self and in relationships inevitably result in the questioning of basic tenets of faith…The majority of people experience the bitterness of being forsaken by God.”\(^{40}\) Taken literally, one would have to infer that Herman assumes all or most people believe in God.\(^{41}\) But with or without a named deity, the implication is that faith is the

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 105-7.
\(^{39}\) Ibid., 49.
\(^{40}\) Ibid., 94. Herman is making this statement in the context of talking about Holocaust survivors, whose experience is taken as the basis for assertions about others who experience prolonged captivity.
\(^{41}\) This may not be a completely unreasonable assumption, at least empirically in a U.S. context. The Pew Research Center’s 2014 Religious Landscape Study found that while the number of religious ‘nones’ and avowed atheists is rising, 83% of respondents were either absolutely certain (63%) or fairly certain (20%) of God’s existence. (“America’s Changing Religious Landscape.” http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/. Accessed January
condition of one who has not (yet) experienced trauma. Existence in a state of faith (whether in God or in a meaningful world) is healthy and enabling, and the absence of faith is a key sign that one’s attitudes are defined by unhealed traumatic injury.

While Herman does not explicitly refer to theodicy, she recognizes that she has raised theological questions that present intellectual and moral issues of justice. Etymologically referring to God’s justice (from the Greek *theo* and *dike*), theodicies attempt to reconcile the idea of an all-good and all-powerful God with the realities of human suffering. Colloquially framed as the question of ‘why bad things happen to good people,’ or at least to people who have done nothing that could warrant the extremities of violence and misfortune turned against them, theodicies seek explanations for what appears senseless. Consistent with Herman’s theorizing about trauma, theodicy emphasizes the undeserved nature of suffering.

The traumatic event challenges an ordinary person to become a theologian, philosopher, and jurist. The survivor is called upon to articulate the values and beliefs that she once held and that the trauma destroyed. She stands mute before the emptiness of evil, feeling the insufficiency of any known system of explanation. Survivors of atrocity of every age and every culture come to a point in their testimony where all questions are reduced to one, spoken more in bewilderment than in outrage: Why? The answer is beyond human understanding.

Like many writers of theodicy, Herman declares that the reasons for unjust suffering are “beyond human understanding.” She does not make reference to a transcendent God who will or will not make final meaning out of these experiences. Instead, it is up to the

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42 Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a bestselling work on this question entitled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981). It has been through several editions under a variety of publishers and is still in lively circulation.

43 Like Kushner, many Christian theologians begin discussions of theodicy with the Hebrew Bible’s book of Job. Job’s undeserved and seemingly meaningless suffering throws into vivid relief a common struggle to make sense of extreme misfortune and unfairness.

44 Herman, *TR*, 178.
survivor to discover “what is to be done,” and to those who accompany her in the process to be in “moral solidarity” with her.45

For Herman, the path to redemption goes beyond recognizing, confronting, or punishing any perpetrator. In a victim’s fall into trauma, “the emptiness of evil” is the key opponent. Downplaying differences in traumatic experiences or contexts, Herman prescribes a teleological path to recovering relationality, faith, and meaning. There are three basic stages to recovery: 1) establishing safety, 2) remembrance and mourning, and 3) reconnecting with ordinary life. Herman writes that these stages are “a convenient fiction not to be taken too literally.”46 She does, however, issue some quite specific prescriptions regarding how these processes ought to occur.

Safety begins with one’s own body, and moves outward to the surrounding environment. In regard to both, the aim is to restore power and control to the survivor.47 The process of attaining safety may involve momentous felt and actual risks. It might, for instance, require that one give up previous sources of financial, emotional, and logistical support if they are tied to harmful people and patterns. Working one’s way out of an abusive relationship frequently involves such “sacrifices.” Herman calls this taking charge of “the material circumstances of [one’s] life” the attainment of freedom. She writes, “Without freedom, there can be no safety and no recovery, but freedom is often achieved at great cost. In order to gain their freedom, survivors may have to give up almost everything else.”48 As she lets go of dependence on those whose power over her life was destructive, the survivor becomes increasingly self-reliant. While safety often

45 Ibid.
46 Ibid., 155. As I have argued in the first chapter, this disclaimer is unheeded in some theological works that recount Herman’s prescriptions in more dogmatic terms.
47 Ibid., 159-62.
48 Ibid., 172.
requires the help of family members, friends, and clinicians, it has primarily to do with
the survivor’s relationship to herself and the degree to which she is able to care for
herself. 49

Herman describes the second stage in which one remembers and mourns for
trauma with heightened religious language. Premature attempts to relate one’s trauma
story, in which one spills a graphic account before safety has been established, are
attempts at catharsis that Herman refers to as ‘exorcism.’ 50 Both therapist and patient may
understandably desire “a purging of the evil of the trauma,” but healing can only occur
through “integration, not exorcism.” 51 While the survivor’s empowerment is a triumph of
good over evil, the achievement of this state cannot be expedited by either revenge or
unearned forgiveness. These, too, would be forms of exorcism. 52 Fantasies of revenge
contaminate a victim’s moral image of herself, and forgiveness cannot be real until “the
perpetrator has sought and earned it through confession, repentance, and restitution.” 53
One must commit in thought and action to an arduous investigation, and sometimes
reliving, of the painful past.

In this moral framework, the survivor cannot save or absolve the one who did
harm. One cannot decisively fix, but only mourn, the losses of a traumatic past. I will say
much more about the narrative reconstruction of traumatic memories in what follows. For
now, it is enough to note that only by taking on the position of fallenness can the survivor
believe in her own innocence. Over the trying process of recalling and mourning, she

49 Ibid., 166-7, 173-4.
50 Ibid., 172.
51 Ibid., 181.
52 Ibid., 190.
53 Ibid., 190. The presumptive innocence of survivors will be discussed in more detail below with
regard to war veterans.
“sheds her evil, stigmatized identity and dares to hope for new relationships in which she has nothing to hide.” While this stage is “never entirely completed,” and trauma can be ‘reawakened’ at later points in life, the private testimony performed in telling one’s story fully can locate it securely in the past.

In the third stage, the survivor becomes able to go beyond the bounds of her own story and self image, and to focus on interpersonal relationships. She can pass her integrated and understood trauma story on to future generations as a ‘legacy’ that expresses her desire to protect others from what she suffered. While most are satisfied to transmit the legacy to those with whom they are immediately and intimately connected, “a significant minority, as a result of the trauma, feel called upon to engage in a wider world.” This version of the third phase is lifted up as its fullest manifestation.

While Herman does not use the term ‘salvation,’ she does employ explicitly redemptive language resonates strongly with that concept. “The trauma is redeemed only when it becomes the source of a survivor mission.”

To the redemptive dimension Herman adds the possibility of attaining transcendence. This occurs in recognizing “a political or religious dimension” to the falling and healing experience, which can lead to “transcendence” in two separate but related ways. Firstly, one transcends the traumatic experience itself in a way that sounds almost sacrificial-- “by making it a gift to others.” Secondly, one can “attain a feeling of

54 Ibid., 194.
55 Ibid., 206-7.
56 Ibid., 207.
57 Ibid. The resonance of a mission with evangelization, as pointed out by Mark Jordan, is also evocative.
58 Ibid. The desirable effects of sharing one’s trauma story with others are hereby assumed. While Herman notes that therapists can be secondarily traumatized by repeated exposure to others’
participation in an order of creation that transcends ordinary reality." The victim-turned-survivor whose social and political work connects her suffering and healing process with collective efforts “can transcend the boundaries of her particular time and place.” All survivors who recover must find new faith, new beliefs that can give their lives meaning. But a survivor who has worked through trauma, reconnected with the world around her, and channeled her personal experiences into larger efforts for justice is a transcendent being.

On the other hand, desacralizing the individual’s trauma is part of the healing process. Eventually, “one becomes bored with the life of a victim and ready to find ordinary life interesting.” While decentering trauma in the narrative of one’s own life at first feels ‘heretical,’ the recognition “that perhaps the trauma is not the most important, or even the most interesting, part of her life story” allows her to reengage with other aspects of life. Healing from trauma ought to involve a return to ordinariness. As the survivor reconnects with others, her identity revolves less and less around being unique and special. Herman does not directly address how this loss of specialness relates to the transcendent survivor who is filled with religious or political purpose. The tension between these aspects of healing endures in the theologies that see trauma as definitive for divine-human relations, but also a rupture in a person’s ordinarily sustaining relationship with God.

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suffering (141), she takes for granted that the wide dissemination of survivors’ stories will work against future trauma and be unequivocally good.

59 Ibid., 208.
60 Ibid., 207-8.
61 Ibid., 196.
62 Ibid., 203.
63 Ibid., 195.
Trauma distorts perceptions and relationships so that they seem to be what they are not. But it also magnifies ultimate questions of ethics and truth in a way that Herman portrays as illuminating. “The survivor who has accomplished her recovery…has a clear sense of what is important and what is not. Having encountered evil, she knows how to cling to what is good. Having encountered the fear of death, she knows how to celebrate life.” Redemption thus comes through a process that revolves around trauma, but also requires the survivor to lessen her identification with trauma as she heals.

Finally, in giving up the notion that trauma makes her unique, the survivor comes to understand that others have suffered terrible things comparable to her own experiences. Human limitations ensure that “to some degree everyone is a prisoner of the past.” Theoretical and theological writers are intensely concerned with the ways that trauma disrupts temporality. Herman mentions disruptions in one’s sense of time while experiencing traumatic events, and emphasizes the developmental problems that trauma can cause in child victims. Her book begins with reference to folktales of “ghosts who refuse to rest in their graves until their stories are told.” But her comment that people are all, to some extent, prisoners of the past hints at an issue that will intensify in other chapters of this dissertation. Are we all haunted in the same ways, and is that haunting in some way independent of our individual experiences? Or, do we all experience something like trauma early in life on which later events chafe and build? Can we be haunted by histories of places, cultures, and conflicts that came long before our individual lifespans?

64 Ibid., 213.
65 Ibid., 235.
66 Ibid., 43, 89.
67 Ibid., 1.
Herman comes closest to addressing these questions in her alignment of trauma’s recognition with righteous political struggle. With motivations rooted in personal experience, one becomes part of a larger battle with violence and oppression that extends through time and space. Herman’s examples include working with social service and legal systems by presenting one’s experiences of incest to a group of child protective workers and serving as a district attorney who prosecutes abusers after having survived domestic violence. Even pursuing one’s own case in court is a social and political act of resistance that means more than its immediate outcome.

In the third stage of recovery, the survivor comes to understand the issues of principle that transcend her personal grievance against the perpetrator. She recognizes that the trauma cannot be undone and that her wishes for compensation or revenge can never be truly fulfilled. She also recognizes, however, that holding the perpetrator accountable for his crimes is important not only for her personal well-being but also for the health of the larger society.

While Herman describes the satisfaction that can come from triumphing in the courtroom, legal disappointments are also to be honored as “part of a larger, ongoing struggle to impose the rule of law on the arbitrary tyranny of the strong.” Particular incidents of abuse occur in social contexts and environments that legitimate unjust uses of power. Failed attempts to see justice done are part of a larger effort to chip away at the ways that institutions protect privileged perpetrators.

In the Afterword composed five years after *Trauma and Recovery*’s first publication, Herman summarizes her initial account: “I argued then that the study of psychological trauma is an inherently political enterprise because it calls attention to the

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68 Ibid., 208.
69 Ibid., 210-11.
70 Ibid., 209.
71 Ibid., 211.
experience of oppressed people.” Insisting upon the injustice of any given event, in this framework, stakes a broader claim for all who are socially and systemically disempowered. A survivor’s “recovery is based not on the illusion that evil has been overcome, but rather on the knowledge that it has not entirely prevailed and on the hope that restorative love may still be found in the world.” In standing up for one’s own experiences, and in encounters with those who support one in doing so, the survivor (re)gains faith that the world contains more than evil and disaster.

My discomfort with this redemptive model of healing stems not primarily from its claims for transcendence, but from its ostensible rootedness in social reality. I would posit that an original state of wholeness is less common or even possible than Herman suggests, both because subjectivity is never so cohesive, and because it is often formed in conditions of oppression and social division. Trauma as the descriptor for all that divides subjectivity conflates a wide range of conditions and social problems.

As for Herman’s prescriptions for healing, even if one brackets concerns about the mixing of existential insecurities with social ones, the ability to create a secure existence in which one can get beyond trauma is differentially available. Once again, this is largely a question of the vulnerabilities engendered by various and intertwined forms of inequality (racial, gendered, economic, etc.). Herman is not oblivious or indifferent to these inequities. In fact, a deep recognition that victims have disparate opportunities to recover from trauma underlies her statement in the Afterword that “only an ongoing

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72 Ibid., 237.
73 Ibid., 211.
74 This is a key argument in Antonio Viego, Dead Subjects: Toward a Politics of Loss in Latino Studies (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). Taking a Lacanian approach to racialized subjectivity, Viego insists on the importance of distinguishing conceptually between those forms of subjective division or alienation that result from acceding to language and those which follow from subjugation, oppression, and outright violence.
connection with a global political movement for human rights could ultimately sustain our ability to speak about unspeakable things.”75 But one should note her persistent tendency to resort to generalities: the global, the human, and opposition to evil are emphasized over more contextual analyses and solutions. In the face of these acknowledged difficulties, Herman proceeds to valorize a mode of healing that cannot be generalized. This begs the question of whether or to what extent these broad terms serve as a cover for normalizing middle class, white experiences.

This concern is enhanced by the research parameters of Herman’s own *Father-Daughter Incest*. Her study of forty survivors intentionally includes only white, middle-class women, and Herman goes on to generalize about ‘women’s’ experiences from its results. The aim of this self-imposed constraint is to avoid biased projections filtered through racist cultural lenses. Herman worries that, “White people have indulged for too long in discussion about the sexual capacities, behaviors, and misbehaviors of black people.”76 She is understandably worried that readers could make too much of racial disparities in such a small sample group. But she elsewhere speculates that abuse statistics in studies that only include white subjects underestimate its occurrence: “Since poor and minority women are subjected to all types of violence and abuse more frequently than the population at large, it is reasonable to suppose that these groups also suffer a higher incidence of sexual assault in childhood. There are no valid data, however, to confirm or disprove these speculations.”77 She therefore predicts the result that she ostensibly fears. While Herman clearly means to say that racial oppression, not more violent fathers, is to blame for the higher statistics she projects, this explanation could

75 Ibid., 237.
76 Herman, *FDI*, 67.
77 Ibid., 14.
apply equally to actual findings of a statistical difference. Her curious solution is to bracket women of color from her research, while claiming that its findings are widely applicable to women in general.

Herman’s rhetorical strategy is to legitimate the experiences of domestic violence and sexual abuse survivors by asserting that they suffer from the same effects as those whose suffering is more culturally recognizable. To echo this chapter’s introduction, she both reflects and authors commonality between those who experience intimate abuse and those who have been to war. She echoes the terms in which the legitimation of shell shock was fought, insisting that innocent victims do not have any intrinsic defects. But in the case of abuse, which she extends to all of trauma, the survivor experiences confrontation with social and moral evil.

Set in opposition to evil, suffering trauma aligns one with innocence. The survivor who pursues and completes the healing process Herman prescribes has gone through a tremendous and ennobling ordeal, and is seen as a voice of conscience and moral guidance for others. But suffering trauma, as Herman would readily admit, does not automatically or necessarily put one on the side of moral right. Herman mentions that combatants who commit terrible acts “seem to suffer the most severe and intractable

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78 I would not want to imply that the recognition of PTSD among veterans or others with whom Herman aligns survivors of domestic violence has secure or enduring privileged status. Veterans’ recognition too is tenuous and recent, and subject in its impact to the vicissitudes of healthcare funding. Herman does not designate research or advocacy concerning survivors of the Holocaust as one of the stages of trauma’s politicized recognition, a curious omission from the chronology that marks its three main stages as hysteria, war neurosis, and domestic violence. This may be a function of the time of the book’s first publication, which preceded most of what is now called Holocaust studies and aligned almost exactly with a text on Holocaust testimony that has undergirded trauma studies in the humanities. [Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, _Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History_ (New York: Routledge, 1992).]
disturbances.”

79 Herman, *TR*, 189.
80 Ibid.
81 Fassin and Rechtman’s account of humanitarian psychiatry would suggest the latter. While I am here focused on Herman’s text, these concerns are large and enduring problems in the study and treatment of trauma. The disparities Fassin and Rechtman cite make clear that selective acknowledgment of trauma is not particular to private clinical practitioners, but extends to large-
rate, an underappreciated instability to the status of victim in Herman’s work that holds important implications for the connections she draws between trauma and social justice.

*Faith in Trauma*

Herman also locates morality on the side of those who believe a survivor’s account of what happened to her. Interestingly, others’ belief in a meaningful life can here be a barrier to taking the survivor’s trauma seriously. One should anticipate, Herman explains, resistance from those who are unwilling to accept stories that challenge “a shared system of belief” regarding “meaning, order, and justice in the world.” Victims’ narratives may call into question accepted power structures and assumptions about others’ morality, and listeners’ desire for social comfort provides an incentive to dismiss such disturbing accounts. This is why, for Herman, believing stories of trauma is a matter of siding with good over evil, and of favoring social and political justice over injustice. Herman compellingly argues that sexual and child abuse are linked to abuses of power,

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scale response efforts that cite cultural and racial differences as explicit reasons that European organizations cannot address the traumatic aftermath of African political upheavals (Fassin and Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 184-8). Médecins du monde published a report on Israeli-Palestinian conflict that declared, “There are no good or bad victims.” This statement, meant to highlight the similarities in Israeli and Palestinian civilian suffering, stirred intense conflict and accusations of bias within the MDM organization (205). Whether a matter of declaring professional limitations (European doctors in Africa) or questioning the morality of political impartiality (between Israel and Palestine), the bounds of humanitarianism are inevitably the bounds of the ostensibly universal category of the human. “[W]hen the language of trauma is used to describe and to testify to extreme violence, our sense of exposing forms of inhumanity is reinforced, and this raises ontological dilemmas.” Fassin and Rechtman note that an abstract appreciation of the terrible results of conflict in Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Mozambique “has not been translated into concrete programs that could help alleviate the consequences” (187). One sees hints of the same tension between philosophical and concrete commitments in Herman’s work when she writes of the importance of global human rights, but sees veterans as the main victims of the Vietnam War.

82 Herman, *TR*, 178.
social hierarchies, and the violent normalization of inequality. When the perpetrator is in a socially empowered and respected position relative to the victim, denials and excuses for the perpetrator’s behavior follow almost as a matter of course. Trauma’s acknowledgment in this framework requires that one believe those who have historically been ignored or discredited.

Coming from a clinical focus on domestic violence and incest, Herman aims to combat widespread denial that abuse occurs and that it is harmful. In the face of disbelief or skepticism, she argues the necessity of believing in trauma. Beyond this first step of acknowledging that trauma occurs, one must believe in the path to healing that she prescribes. Survivors often hold a “fantasy of a fast, cathartic cure,” but as I have shown, Herman insists that such ‘exorcism’ is impossible. Instead, survivors must assent to a longer, slower, and undoubtedly painful journey. For the sake of endurance, both patients and clinicians must cultivate “a belief in the restorative power of truth-telling.” Belief must be paradoxically tentative and absolute, to ensure both that one does settle for an insufficient narration and that skepticism does not poison the clinical relationship.

Questions of belief pertain especially to the stage of recovery focused on remembrance and mourning. Key to this process is the survivor’s discovery and verbal elaboration of what happened to her. According to Herman, traumatic memories are at first ‘iconic’ in nature, and may initially need to be expressed in “nonverbal methods of communication, such as drawing or painting.” In order to perform the factual

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83 This argument is especially prominent in *Father-Daughter Incest.*
84 Herman, *TR,* 172, 174.
85 Ibid., 181. It is also notable that this proposed method requires a therapeutic relationship of considerable duration, something that is disparately available based on income and insurance.
86 Interestingly, icons in religious contexts are both human made and sites of direct access to something sacred. Herman, in contrast, seems to be describing a directness of contact that circumvents human agency.
reconstruction necessary to recovery, however, one must “put the story, including its imagery, into words.”\(^{87}\) Noting that some practitioners in the history of trauma treatment would erase traumatic memories,\(^{88}\) Herman insists that facing difficult truths is necessary. It is crucial that the survivor “reconstruct not only what happened but also what she felt.”\(^{89}\) The process requires patience, and is only possible if one has faith in its eventual efficacy.

When Herman asserts that “The fundamental premise of psychotherapeutic work is a belief in the restorative power of truth-telling,”\(^{90}\) she makes a clinical claim as well as a philosophical one: Traumatic memories cannot be resolved through purging (a claim of clinical fact), and trauma is best addressed by identifying the truth of what occurred as accurately as possible (a clinical, philosophical, and moral assessment of diverse approaches to treatment). Ultimately, the success of the process depends on ‘belief’ in the method.

In her insistence on traumatic events being factually retold and relived, Herman resists any figurative dimension in language or signification as insufficiently truthful. Patients should be expected to come up short in preliminary attempts to give an account of their experiences. Herman explains, “From the outset, the therapist should place great emphasis on the importance of truth-telling and full disclosure, since the patient is likely

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\(^{87}\) Herman, *TR*, 177.  
\(^{88}\) Ian Hacking compares Pierre Janet’s ostensibly humane approach, which did involve erasing memories, to what he calls Freud’s ‘will to truth’ [Ian Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 195]. For Herman, the truth to be obtained is one of externally imposed injury, where for Freud one could also be traumatized by internal processes.  
\(^{89}\) Ibid., 177.  
\(^{90}\) Ibid., 181.
to have many secrets, including from herself.”91 Both therapist and survivor are striving to construct “an organized, detailed, verbal account, oriented in time and historical context.”92 Drawing, painting, and other ways of ‘imaging’ can be initial steps in communicating one’s trauma story, but there is an unequivocal need “to put the story, including its imagery, into words.”93

While there is inescapable uncertainty about whether one ever has the complete trauma story, skepticism about the traumatic experience is equivalent to siding with perpetrators. The need to establish a traumatic event’s real occurrence, and the real impact that event has on a life, is deemed incompatible with the suggestion that any of what is recounted could be the survivor or therapist’s invention, fantasy, or mistake. The trauma story says what actually occurred, and is not an imaginative or symbolic rendering of experience. Narratives are therapeutically important, in part, because they involve putting previously inchoate sensations and memories into a form that garners recognition as recounting a real event. This framework assumes necessary and automatic alignment between what serves the patient and what confirms the trauma story to an audience.

Herman’s therapeutic prescriptions, at least in a systematic reading, contain tensions that she seems reluctant to thematize explicitly. Against a hegemonic assurance that things are in their proper place, survivors must insist on the reality of trauma. At the same time, the truth of their own experiences might be difficult to access or ascertain for certain. The therapist’s role is that of “open-minded, compassionate witness, not a detective.”94 Yet the process of reconstructing a trauma story involves reproducing the

91 Herman, TR, 148.  
92 Ibid., 177.  
93 Ibid., 177.  
94 Ibid., 180.
experience “as a recitation of fact.”

Neither the therapist nor the survivor should feel prematurely assured that they have the whole truth, and neither should be satisfied with less than the truth unless it is (somehow) determined over time to be impossible to recover. The possibility that there are limits to reconstruction means that there is a necessary oscillation between wholehearted belief in every detail and a withholding of belief that always suspects more truth can be told. Herman offers little guidance for how one ought to navigate this emotional and logical bind.

**Trauma, Memory, and Justice**

Just as Herman opened and closed the question of whether veterans are best described as victims, she raises and quickly covers over conundrums about believing narratives of trauma. While Herman attempts to sideline worries that stories of trauma can be conjured by therapeutic suggestion, this dismissal elides a complex and unrelenting debate about memory that spans scientific, philosophical, and clinical discourses. The mid-to-late 1990s brought a flurry of attempts to make sense of the so-called ‘memory wars,’ a set of arguments about the veracity of recovered memories of abuse that split research and clinical professionals in psychiatry and psychology. The debate extends, albeit with some new data sets, into the present decade. But for Herman, to get hung up on empirical questions about the mechanisms or reliability of

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95 Ibid., 177.
memory is to neglect the fact that trauma exists, and that it is fundamentally about oppression and injustice.\(^98\)

Herman is acutely aware that inequality enables and justifies particular forms of victimization. This is a key premise of her earlier work entitled *Father-Daughter Incest*. She finds that “male supremacy,” under which daughters and women in general are treated as property, observes an incest taboo primarily as “a rule governing their exchange.”\(^99\) Since such taboos exist to protect the rights of fathers, little stands in the way of a father abusing his daughter.\(^100\) She concludes that male childhood socialization within patriarchal family structures breeds adult males who are prone to sexual exploitation and incapable of “empathizing or identifying” with women.\(^101\) Father-daughter incest is therefore “but one manifestation of a despotic paternal rule.”\(^102\) This basic insight that the cause of trauma is a function of power imbalances forms the foundation for *Trauma and Recovery*. There, it is the victim of trauma (any trauma) who is both powerless and oppressed.

In *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman is committed to consolidating what Ian Hacking would call a prototype. Neither an average nor an actual case, a prototype “is part of what people understand by a concept, what they point to when the want to explain

\(^{98}\) Herman has elsewhere described the need to bypass limits in data in order to practice what one knows to be effective treatment. In 2008, Herman maintained that, “at our current level of scientific understanding, we do not really know how psychotherapy works (when it does work), or why it doesn’t work (when it doesn’t). Though we may aspire to the status of a science, the practice of psychotherapy is a craft.” (Judith Herman, “Craft and Science in the Treatment of Traumatized People,” in *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation* 9.3(2008): 294). Herman urges recognition that adequate standards and modes of measuring outcomes do not exist, and that, “We are nowhere near to establishing a gold standard in trauma treatment” (Ibid., 295).

\(^{99}\) Herman, *FDI*, 60, 62.

\(^{100}\) Ibid., 60.

\(^{101}\) Ibid., 56.

\(^{102}\) Ibid., 63.
This colloquial generality may sound unscientific, but Hacking insists that prototypical examples are essential to scientific thinking and its ways of “conveying meaning.” Herman targets the common sense definition of trauma, necessarily distinct from diagnostic criteria. She might even argue that one must as a matter of common sense believe trauma narratives, while clinical practice must exercise a certain skepticism about whether any given narrative is complete and final. But there may be also be an important distinction between employing prototypes in abstract analysis and using them in psychiatric practice, a differentiation that Herman does not make. Hacking suggests that problems arise when people are encouraged “to feel like [the prototype]…to become like that. This is a powerful way to create mental illness in susceptible auditors.” It is this experience that Hacking argues is similar to conversion to a “dubious religion.”

There may be good reason to educate clinicians and survivors alike about traumatic prototypes. In Herman’s account, this is key to destigmatizing suffering—realizing that one is not defective or ‘crazy,’ but suffering from externally inflicted harm. On the other hand, once a prototype is in play it is hard to distinguish its power to constitute experience from its power to describe it. And a prototype that attributes the causes of suffering to solely external causes may mislead clinicians and survivors alike, in ways that Janice Haaken argues deprive survivors of complex subjectivity.

While Herman shows that wider oppressions contribute to trauma, Haaken argues that a variety of experiences with social inequality may funnel into the concept of trauma. She points out that the disorders, categories, and concepts associated with trauma provide

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103 Hacking, 34.
104 Ibid., 35.
105 Ibid., 35.
106 Ibid., 34.
107 Haaken, 182-3.
tools for expressing social and moral injuries that are not taken seriously when they occur on a less dramatic scale. Haaken suggests that struggles over trauma and memory may be about much more than telling and confirming stories of abuse, but in fact indict entire social structures. For Haaken, a story of childhood sexual abuse told in adulthood may be significant beyond its correspondence to events that actually occurred. As her title *Pillar of Salt* and retelling of the biblical story of Lot’s wife would indicate, Haaken aims to vindicate women’s ‘looking back,’ even when its referents are indeterminate. While discounted or even condemned by patriarchal norms, the turn to the past is animated by valid impulses—mourning, questioning, and discontent that ought to be honored. Still, Haaken withholds decisive declarations about the literal truth of recovered abuse memories. In a manner that would be heretical to Herman, Haaken argues that the truth-telling at stake in therapeutic remembering is not necessarily (primarily) factual. Stories are instruments by which the tellers and listeners articulate and understand inchoate claims about pain and injustice. The symbolic and social truths conveyed through trauma narratives convey crucial truths about power, domination, and suffering. Haaken explains that the figure of the incest survivor “speaks to a broad set of female grievances.” She provides a vocabulary and site of identification that could apply to “every woman’s seductions under patriarchy, for the myriad, daily violations of her sense of self, and for the estrangement so many women experience from their own bodies.”

This does not mean that all trauma narratives are figurative, but urges that we not discount the possibility that some are, or recoil in horror or denial if some are found to be so.

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108 Ibid., 180-1.
Central to Haaken’s work is the observation that trauma discourse does not only liberate (as Herman would have it), but also constrains. When trauma comes to define unjust suffering, or suffering of a magnitude that must be taken seriously, finding and generating stories about trauma is a key means available for voicing dissatisfaction with intimate and social conditions. Everyday slights or more minor violations of physical and psychic space may be condensed into a cataclysmic story that does better emotional justice to their cumulative impact than the account of small, singular incidents could register. This possibility mirrors the use of the Fall as an explanatory framework that lends to senseless experience a reassuring form and trajectory. One may need to cast oneself as fallen, or be tempted to cast others in this light, in order to assert potential for redemption.

A comparison of the ways that Herman and Haaken approach narratives of childhood sexual abuse resembles familiar theological debates about how one ought to read sacred texts. In Herman’s account, belief is equated with faith in the literal truth of a story. She sometimes acknowledges that full stories may never be told, or that certain therapists may be overly suggestive in eliciting abuse narratives. But the task of therapy is to collect whatever facts can be recalled, to order them so far as possible into a linear and coherent account of what really happened. The therapist and survivor should both insist on the truth of the reconstructed story in private, public, and political settings. While a therapist might sometimes doubt that she has received the whole truth, and use that doubt to push the narration process forward, failure to believe the survivor’s story as told is betrayal—it is siding with the abuser, and with evil.
Haaken’s listener is not a skeptic, and is in a certain sense even less so than Herman’s, since she would trust that even factually inaccurate narratives are true. This is akin to an allegorical reading of scripture, which does not deny the sacredness of the text but understands its truth as a thing that requires active interpretation on the part of the listener. For Herman, the confessional procedures of therapy must draw out truths that the patient might resist telling. Haaken would assume that the patient is telling a truth, with an indeterminate idea of what that truth is or means.

*Open Systems: Healing and Ritualization*

An article co-authored by Herman states that “The veracity of [a patient’s] history does not hang on the accurate and detailed recall of specific events.” Herman and Mary R. Harvey argue that ‘false’ and ‘true’ are inadequate terms for memories that arise in therapy. As in *Trauma and Recovery*, the typical case is not a patient who has fabricated memories, but a person who seeks professional help in dealing with a largely known past. But while *Trauma and Recovery* emphasized the grueling process by which detailed memories needed to be unearthed over extended therapeutic treatment, here the authors insist that,

Contrary to the portrait of clinical work with trauma survivors being promulgated by the popular press and the false memory literature, the aim of clinical exploration of the traumatic past is neither to uncover more and more horror, nor to assign blame and responsibility for adult life to others, but rather to help the adult survivor name and assign meaning and comprehensibility to the past, to facilitate the integration of traumatic remembrance into an ongoing personal narrative, and to help the patient grieve the past and be free of it.110

109 Mary R. Harvey and Judith Herman, “Amnesia, Partial Amnesia, and Delayed Recall among Adult Survivors of Childhood Abuse,” in *The Recovered Memory/False Memory Debate*, 37.

110 Ibid., 38.
These comments are not necessarily at odds with the professed method and aims of Herman’s 1992 book. The journey to redemption from trauma also requires integration, grief, and letting go. But there is a change in tone in Harvey and Herman’s article, where they repeatedly plead the complexities and ambiguities of recalling traumatic events.

Why does *Trauma and Recovery* place such emphasis on belief and faith, while this article written two years later highlights the contingencies and uncertainties that attend a patient’s process of “gradually constructing a meaningful and largely verifiable” narrative history? I do not think that the explanation for this difference would be best put in terms of belief or sincerity, or a change of mind. It seems that while *Trauma and Recovery* lays out a prototype and insists on its broad applicability, Herman is elsewhere interested in how individual cases may diverge from the prototypical. In a 2008 editorial for the *Journal of Trauma and Dissociation*, Herman emphasizes that “the range of psychological trauma is very broad, calling for diversity and flexibility in the range of treatment approaches.”

In this more relaxed and ambiguous mode, Herman asserts, “Though we may aspire to the status of a science, the practice of psychotherapy is a craft.” This statement calls to mind Henri F. Ellenberger’s opening chapter on “The Ancestry of Dynamic Psychotherapy” in his formidable *The Discovery of the Unconscious*. He writes, “The development of modern psychotherapy has drawn attention to the mystery of the mechanism of psychological healing and shown how many of its details still puzzle

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111 Ibid., 37.
112 Herman, “Craft and Science,” 299.
113 Ibid., 294.
us.”¹¹⁴ He goes on to illustrate a variety of ‘primitive’ healing practices that he frames as precursors to psychotherapy. Notably, most of the healing practices described were observed by nineteenth and twentieth century anthropologists, so the label of primitive and assumption that these practices constitute north-western prehistory reflects a particular cultural orientation more than an actual chronology.

There is a tendency to frame other cultures’ healing practices as more obscure and less knowing than psychotherapy. According to Ellenberger, “One of the main differences between modern scientific treatment and primitive healing is that the former is matter-of-fact, while the latter is usually performed as a ceremony.”¹¹⁵ It is assumed that psychotherapy proceeds according to rationality, with understood relationships between causes and effects. The ceremonies of scientific methods and procedures are taken to be utterly unbiased, bearing no impact on their findings. Haaken describes this opposition as a matter of comprehending the therapeutic mechanism:

> Both patient and therapist may be under the influence of factors that escape notice. Yet the difference between shamanism and psychotherapy, each of which may relieve suffering through some form of suggestion, is that the explanations offered by psychotherapy are presumably verifiable in the scientific sense…Although psychotherapy may be accompanied by myriad rituals, with their various placebo effects and instances of superstitious learning, the ‘enlightened’ practitioner is obliged to understand such processes.¹¹⁶

Haaken is, to a certain extent, marking the conceits and impossible demands that attend modern Western treatment practices. But this makes it even more interesting that Herman, who so forcefully advocated for a standard approach to trauma and healing, hesitates to assign scientific certainty to psychiatry. In a statement that uncannily recalls

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 28.
¹¹⁶ Haaken, 148.
Freud’s invocations of the knowledge-to-come that would secure psychoanalysis by scientific explanation, Herman claims that, “While psychotherapy is not yet at the level of a science [italics mine], we can foster an attitude of scientific inquiry based in respect for the clinician’s craft.”¹¹⁷ Psychotherapy is in a primitive, pre-scientific stage in which observation and inquiry can demonstrate, albeit unsystematically, that a variety of techniques can achieve similar results. The skill of the practitioner and idiosyncrasies of the patient apparently determine which methods are effective.¹¹⁸

The forms of healing Herman advocates, while varied in the ways described above, consistently involve some form of abreaction followed by integration, both of which are accomplished through narrative. While Trauma and Recovery treats these processes as almost mechanically reliable, comments elsewhere recognize the therapeutic relationship as a performative space that houses ritualized experiments in storytelling. With Herman’s emphasis on belief (in trauma, stories, and the therapeutic process) taken into account, one might speculate that the story that cures is a felicitous performative. It might take some trial and error to arrive at the story that hits its mark, but each telling attempts to enact healing. Perhaps, to incorporate Judith Butler’s terms into Herman’s, the survivor works with a therapist to counter culturally imposed silences in a process of self-making as critique, (re)making a self in a way that “exposes the limits of the historical scheme of things.”¹¹⁹ That exposure does constitute a certain demonstration or articulation of ‘truth,’ and it captures the political valence that Herman associates with recovery.

¹¹⁷ Herman, “Craft and Science,” 299-300.
¹¹⁸ Ibid., 296.
Yet even this use of belief implies an extant investment in feeling satisfied that one has narrated a true story, and that this story ought to bridge the personal and political. The performative approach to theory that I am taking throughout this dissertation insists that we are simultaneously making the things we analyze. The fact that theory misrecognizes its own rituals is perhaps unavoidable, and not intrinsically negative. Yet, as the next chapter’s analysis of Cathy Caruth’s literary trauma theory will demonstrate, it is highly consequential which errors we make and why. Questions about the extent to which we can choose our mistakes, and the criteria for choosing well, are key elements for self-reflection if we wish to understand what trauma theory does.

It is, moreover, precisely what we may do without knowing that ought to preoccupy us when we attempt to apply lessons from particular instances of suffering to other circumstances. Herman presumes that survivors’ experiences will connect seamlessly with optimal political goals. That is, because individuals are harmed in ways that reflect social injustice, the individual’s story is like a synecdoche for societal problems. But a survivor’s mission may do its own violence, even if the harm caused is not best described as perpetration. Similarly, a therapist’s knowledge of her patients’ suffering may have significant ethical and political implications, but it is difficult to know their bounds. How far can one generalize based on one’s personal archive of experiences? And what are the dangers in treating individual experiences as the basis for broader authority?

According to Herman, Bertha Pappenheim “found her voice, and her sanity, in the women’s liberation movement.” She follows a tradition of reading Pappenheim as “one

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120 Herman, *TR*, 19.
of a number of celebrated hysterics who later led altruistic public lives.” As illustrated in the preface to this chapter, this statement is not false, but there is much more to the story. Without questioning Pappenheim’s ideological commitments to women’s equality, her interventions took place in a web of power and struggle that make easy moral and political valuation of her actions impossible. She both oppressed and aided the recipients of her service, and participated in the formulation and reiteration of harmful racial categories. This is not to place special blame on Pappenheim, who was a singular participant in widespread patterns of thought and action. It does, however, indicate the likely limits of any single actor’s perspective and consciousness.

Herman also seems to dismiss or misrecognize that the therapist’s relationship to the patient entails an unequal power dynamic. She assumes that siding with the survivor guarantees benign effects, and that a political allegiance to the survivor’s cause cancels out any dominance the clinician might hold. This stance remains consistent across Herman’s works. In her jointly authored “Amnesia, Partial Amnesia, and Delayed Recall,” she and Mary Harvey assert that, “there is no empirical evidence to suggest that psychotherapy is a factor at all in the majority of cases of delayed recall.” This stance may explain her extreme credulity when it comes to multiple personality disorder, a heavily contested diagnosis which usually involved recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse. For Herman, the problem with multiple personality disorder is that clinicians and patients may hesitate to assign the diagnosis, “the therapist through

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122 Harvey and Herman, 30.
ignorance or denial, the patient through shame or fear”. In her account, the disorder lies waiting to be discovered in the patient whose early abuse has implanted it.

In contrast, Hacking writes, “Psychiatry did not discover that early and repeated child abuse causes multiple personality. It forged that connection, in the way that a blacksmith turns formless molten metal into tempered steel.” He emphasizes the ways that alters (referring to alter egos, that is, other personalities) are “encouraged and cultivated” in therapy to give shape to more amorphous psychic pain. Hacking does not pretend to resolve the pressing question of whether abuse remembered in therapies for multiple personality disorder has really occurred, but he demonstrates that the diagnosis is collaboratively constructed across therapeutic settings.

In contestations about Multiple Personality Disorder, we see a debate playing out that belongs solidly to the 1990s (with roots in the 1970s and 80s). But the larger issues it touches on are still relevant to trauma’s broader conceptualization. Assigning the cause of adult suffering to forgotten and hidden childhood trauma posits a particular kind of fallen state. Firstly, another person is directly to blame for one’s fall. Secondly, recovering and integrating memories of abuse is the required treatment. This is the model at play in Herman’s work, which focuses only on trauma caused by human actions (as opposed to illness, natural disasters, etc.). While Hacking would say that “Multiple personality

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123 Herman, TR, 157.
124 Hacking, 94.
125 Ibid., 27-8.
126 In fact, Hacking highlights the necessity of being unable to decide, saying, “We are left with only one sound rule of thumb. Any expert who is confident in these matters is thoroughly suspect” (113).
127 Ibid., 14.
128 Ibid. 20.
129 Such a definition of trauma could be put to use in an analysis of inequality that demonstrates how humans indirectly contribute to even those forms of trauma that seem to be ‘naturally’
provided a new way to be an unhappy person,”\textsuperscript{130} Herman believes that a therapist can discover “a traumatic syndrome” such as multiple personality disorder and offer it to the patient as an object of knowledge. “Knowledge is power…By ascertaining her diagnosis, she begins the process of mastery.”\textsuperscript{131}

The therapist, in Herman’s account, has no power to shape the survivor’s narrative, and thus cannot be suspected of undue influence. But she has a form of elevated knowledge that sees the survivor’s condition more clearly than is possible for the survivor herself (“Even after the clinician has arrived at a presumptive diagnosis of multiple personality disorder, it is not at all unusual for the patient to reject the diagnosis”).\textsuperscript{132} And Herman implies, though does not exactly say, that the therapist must attempt to influence the survivor to persuade her of her illness. That this occurs in the name of the survivor’s potential ‘mastery’ of the situation obscures the likely power of the therapist’s intervention.

There may be a place for speaking of mastery over one’s painful past. And I am not insisting on pursuing the real over the fictional, as if such a distinction could be definitively made. Part of my point is that narratives of suffering necessarily create fictions that enable struggle and survival. Nor would I condemn revolutionary bravado, which, as Herman well knows, can be a powerful call to conscience and consciousness. I am merely saying that it may be dangerous for helping professionals (or academics, for

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\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 236.
\textsuperscript{131} Herman, \textit{TR}, 158.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 157.
that matter) to claim special knowledge of the conditions and terms of individual and societal redemption.

Activists and advocates might require the ennobling narratives that sustain cultural and political work. Inflated talk of “ending” violence, enabling “thriving,” and working for “liberation” psychically sustain individuals and collectives through everyday efforts that meet with incremental, uncertain, and often discouraging outcomes. None of this makes such work less necessary or urgent. Rather than prematurely declaring success, this language may even track a movement or society’s distance from ideals.\(^\text{133}\) Perhaps these exercises in overstatement constitute hypothetical eschatologies—experiments in projecting a future that could only arrive by radical transformation. Hyperbole, even when it lacks subtlety, can be a boon to critical thinking and engagement.\(^\text{134}\)

The manner in which Herman employs theological language and concepts in *Trauma and Recovery* nonetheless shuts down questions about what enables or constrains our abilities to identify harm, what attention to others hurts and helps, and what relationship individual healing has to broader social and political struggles. These are matters that will persist in future chapters, and the uncertainties they present encourage us to continually and responsively hone our visions of justice.

\(^\text{133}\) This is the explicit strategy of the #Not1More campaign against deportations. A point of reference from religious studies is Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Bare Facts of Ritual,” in *History of Religions* 20.1/2 (Aug.-Nov. 1980): 112-127. Reading anthropological accounts of bear hunting and its surrounding rituals, he writes, “I would also assume that, at some point, [the hunter] reflects on the difference between his actual killing and the perfection represented by the ceremonial killing” (126). Ritual is a reminder of the distance between ideal and reality.

\(^\text{134}\) Dominick LaCapra makes a similar argument, writing about “the possibly thought-provoking and fruitful role of hyperbole in emphasizing what one believes is given insufficient weight at a given time in the ongoing attempt to articulate possibilities in a discipline or in the broader culture” (*Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 35).
Postscript: A Question of Virtue

The Epilogue to the 2015 edition of *Trauma and Recovery* reiterates and refigures the trope of the Fall, declaring the time of first publication “an era that seems now like a time of lost innocence in the United States.” She begins with clearly systemic issues—mass incarceration, domestic militarization and unending occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and sexual assault on college campuses—and traces patterns in the effects of childhood adversity on adults’ mental health.

Herman then describes a study at Cambridge Hospital known as the Family Pathways project, which follows infants and mothers “who were referred by community agencies because of concerns about the quality of maternal care.” The program has enjoyed some evident successes in improving secure attachment and children’s behavior in school. But these positive effects are negatively reflected in Herman’s descriptions of the control group, those parents and children who did not receive Family Pathways intervention to throw them off a “malignant developmental pathway.” Teachers reported the children to be “hostile” and complained of their “maladaptive” and “disturbed” behavior. They were disproportionately diagnosed with borderline and dissociative disorders, and at higher risk of suicide and self-injury. Without help to create a “virtuous cycle” of secure existence and attachment, a high percentage of children neglected at a young age are destined for “a worsening cascade of developmental pathology.”

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135 Herman, *TR*, 248.
136 Ibid., 260.
137 Ibid., 262-3.
138 Ibid., 263. It is troubling, though beyond the scope of this chapter, that Herman rests a child’s mental health destiny so unilaterally on the shoulders of mothers.
What does it mean to side with victims? Is it in their service to declare that children who do not conform to behavioral norms because of psychic pain are degraded and bad? Such a study’s findings can no doubt be used to advocate for better social services. But there is a keen and subtle danger in allowing this language to monopolize our visions of human potential and justice. As we repeatedly declare children, or any one, to be pathological and devoid of virtue (particularly when what disallowed some to have ‘virtue’ was their chance assignment to the control group in a study), we repeat the moral structure of the theological fall that permeates this theory of trauma. Malignant development echoes the logic of the Fall, implicitly affiliating those it describes with premature decay and death.
Chapter 3

The Passion of Theory in Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience*

Readers of Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience* have long debated the extent to which her theory of trauma is really a postmodern account of selfhood.¹ Is it a linguistic theory about the universal—or distinctly modern—structure of subjectivity? Is all of life trauma, or traumatically structured? Or does trauma amplify or exemplify something that applies in milder ways to all of language and experience? Susannah Radstone asks, “is it that theories of trauma are taken to illuminate the relation between actuality and representation in general, or is it that actuality is beginning to be taken as traumatic in and of itself?”² These uncertainties raise particular concerns about how actual traumatic experiences and their effects might be elided or misunderstood. Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman voice their concern that “the universalization of trauma results in its trivialization…Not only do scales of violence disappear, but their history is erased.”³

Blurring history into a singular mass that is traumatic or *is trauma* distorts our understanding of particular circumstances and events.

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I will argue that, far from being outside of Caruth’s scope of awareness and inquiry, these questions are ones that she names and attempts to address. Caruth’s complex attempt to clarify trauma’s relationship to experience and language is centrally located but only indirectly articulated in Unclaimed Experience, and this indirectness may be the reason it is so often overlooked. I zero in on a seldom-discussed chapter that, making no direct reference to trauma, describes “theory”\(^4\) as a form of falling. Caruth identifies in theory a necessary failure that is tied to bodily mortality, and thus to constant potential for trauma. Neither readers nor writers transcend what it means to be embodied, even when they perform the act (‘do theory’) in ways that attempt to smooth over vulnerability and fallibility. Theory’s performative status means that it is always fallen or falling, always trying to make sense of the fact that it cannot be exempted from a gravitational slide towards death.

Caruth hardly mentions literary scholar Shoshana Felman in Unclaimed Experience,\(^5\) yet she describes trauma in terms nearly identical to concepts that appear in Felman’s essays in the volume Testimony, coauthored with psychoanalyst Dori Laub.\(^6\) While Caruth was initiating the form of inquiry in the humanities that revolves around the word trauma, Testimony might be read retrospectively as having laid out its basic terms and frameworks. Although critics of Caruth pose questions about whether her scholarly

\(^4\) I acknowledge that ‘theory’ can refer to many things, both modes and fields of thought. My understanding of Caruth’s use of the term, which is my readerly impression and not a definition, is that theory contains a built-in acknowledgment of there being something unstable or impossible at the heart of the philosophical project. Philosophy might strive for systematic completion, but theory is more interested in how and why one would attempt such a thing—what kind of desire or purpose drives these efforts, and where they might unintentionally lead.

\(^5\) The two occasions that she does so are footnotes on Caruth, UE, 169, n. 8 and 174, n. 3. Only in the second note, which belongs to the recently published Afterword, does Caruth mention Testimony.

investment is really in life or language, *Testimony* is an explicit bringing together of theory about both. The introduction specifies that Laub, an experienced trauma therapist and cofounder of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University, writes with a different set of practices and concerns than Felman, whose training and teaching focuses on literary and philosophical texts. One is accustomed to reading, the other to listening, and these activities are framed as complementary but distinct. *Testimony* is an effort to bring their insights together without eliding their “different emphases, the different kinds of pragmatic situations and the different kinds of difficulties inherent to the exercises of the disciplines in which we work and by which our insights and our methods are informed.” At the same time, Felman is consistently concerned with questions of politics and lived ethics, and Laub’s psychoanalytic methods rely heavily on analyzing language. The differences in their accustomed methods are not superficial, but they share an attunement to how language works that can be tracked throughout *Testimony*.

Felman’s essays on Camus and de Man highlight how the witness is embedded and implicated in trauma. For Caruth, the possibility of trauma is metaphorically aligned with gravity—an irresistible, magnetic force that can only be countered by an actively opposing pull. Both Felman and Caruth suggest that falling is an apt metaphor for a common and very human inability to fulfill one’s ethical responsibility toward others. This fall can indicate despair over one’s own failure of responsibility, and the experiences of witnesses embedded in a history they cannot fully understand and may imaginatively misread.

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7 Ibid., xvi.
Caruth’s notion of theory as falling draws from Paul de Man’s writings on Kantian critique, in which de Man highlights Kant’s impossible striving to systematically resolve what is ultimately irresolvable. These are both moral and rational limits, which de Man associates with both physical and theological falling. Shoshana Felman reads de Man’s work alongside his life as jointly demonstrating the impossibility of fully conscious ethical decision-making. Implicitly following Felman, Caruth argues that this limitation enables rather than blocks an ethical relationship between theory and history.

While Caruth helpfully defuses demands for ethical perfection in theory, she suggests (like Felman) that de Man somehow performed an exemplary self-effacing theoretical practice that others might adopt. The metaphorical fall that Caruth describes as belonging to theory aligns with a fall that de Man associates explicitly with original sin. Caruth associates this falling with the theorist’s own possible trauma and inevitable death, and implies that this same vulnerability makes moral perfection impossible. Unlike Felman, Caruth does not directly engage issues of complicity or guilt in relation to de Man’s biography.

Caruth breaks off her reading of de Man and Kant just as both approach their respective discussions of the sublime. I read this break as the mark of an anxiety about, or at minimum a lack of desire to deal with, the question of how the theorizing witness may seek in others’ trauma a key to ‘real’ experience. While Caruth helpfully defuses demands for ethical perfection in theory, there is enduring ambiguity about what

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8 A similar move in queer and critical theory, following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s interpretations of Melanie Klein, attempts to shift from “paranoid reading” toward “reparative” modes of engagement. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re so Paranoid, You Probably Think this Essay is About You,” in Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 123-51.

9 De Man’s writings in a French collaborationist paper in the 1940s were unknown to his U.S. students during his lifetime.
theoretical failures actually mean. According to the poststructuralist understanding of language that Caruth invokes through de Man, no experience (traumatic or not) is fully available or known. Indeed, one of Caruth’s main points in the chapter under examination is that the mundane and catastrophic are always in close proximity. Is the fall or Fall she describes simply that—trauma’s inseparability from the rest of existence? Or, is it primarily about the insufficiency of any theoretic portrayal of trauma or response to trauma, and the fact that we pursue theory anyway? Like Herman, Caruth does not consider that we may be pursuing a theory of trauma in ways that are themselves complicit or problematic. That possibility is one that I would urge be constantly maintained. This premise does not require a halt to all theorizing about trauma, but it asks what is lost in the generalizations produced, and what subject positions are implicitly assigned greater and lesser value.

**Concentric History and the Fall of Witnessing**

In *Testimony*, Shoshana Felman performs two readings of Albert Camus that bookend her chapter on de Man, which I will discuss later. Felman reads *The Fall* as a revision of *The Plague*, and as demonstrating their author’s loss of confidence in a witness’s ability to portray what ‘really happened’ in narrative form. She describes this fallen mode of witnessing in the same (nearly verbatim) terms that Caruth will later describe trauma. For Felman, the fall of witnessing indicates the impossibility of redeeming history’s violence. The faith that an accurate account of what really happened can serve restorative or compensatory functions or inoculate against future atrocity is shattered. The witness fails to really see what occurs and fails to testify with any efficacy.
There is no salvation for those lost or those who remain, largely because the witness’s consciousness always arrives ‘too late.’

In *The Plague*, the narrator’s testimony is that of a faithful and reliable witness whose ability to recount terrible events serves a redemptive function. He claims validity through his firsthand experience of the events related, an individual voice for “communal knowledge” and shared suffering. Dr. Rieux, the narrator, has experienced his own vulnerability to infection and saw for himself what happened to those who caught the plague. His position as a doctor, moreover, one who wagers a “professional struggle against death,” puts him in especially close and bodily contact with both loss and survival.

Witness in this mode is a calling. It follows from the narrator’s professional vocation, and reflects the author’s (Camus’) sense of urgency. While *The Plague* is an allegory for the Second World War, and thus not a literal firsthand account, Felman identifies its task as one of testimony. It is an act of writing in which thought attempts to catch up to history’s events. The novel intervenes in

an age whose writing task (and reading task) is to confront the horror of its own destructiveness, to attest to the unthinkable disaster of culture’s breakdown, and to attempt to assimilate the massive trauma, and the cataclysmic shift in being that resulted, within some reworked frame of culture or within some revolutionized order of consciousness.

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10 Caruth’s rewriting of this framework in terms of trauma takes a similar stance towards history, one that reads into silence and absence a missing record that would constitute the real. In contrast to Felman, Caruth sporadically suggests an asymptotic approach to this real, and a hope that witnesses who persist in the face of seeming impossibility might eventually awaken and understand.


12 Ibid., 112.

13 First published in the French resistance journal *Combat*.

14 Ibid., 114.
Note the similarities between this description of reading and writing and the narrative processes that Judith Herman promotes for treating trauma—testifying, assimilating, and integrating experiences of terrible events within a revised sense of order.

As in Herman’s work, acts of narrating trauma and bearing witness take on heroic and politicized implications. The disruptions have been cataclysmic, but recovery is possible and coherence can be restored. This is not to say that Camus (or Felman or Herman) supposes such witnessing and overcoming to be easy, or that the process of testifying is one that conveys all of what happened. Art that testifies must run up against the limits of what can be known and conveyed, throwing into relief the ways that limits—particularly those between life and death—simultaneously do and do not hold.

Survival wavers on this line, and testimony may even become the purpose of survival, the thing that can give life meaning when past meanings have been removed or denied.\(^{15}\) In the words of Elie Wiesel, “The victims elect to become witnesses.”\(^{16}\) And in the case of Camus’ Dr. Rieux and others who choose to remain in solidarity when offered escape, “the witnesses elect to become the victims.”\(^{17}\) Siding with history’s victims is an “historical, ethical and existential choice,”\(^{18}\) one that can be made in spite of a seemingly insurmountable loss of agency. While, as Felman notes, the madman shooting in the streets after the plague has passed lays a seed of discomfort—all violence is not gone or

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 117.
\(^{17}\) Felman, *Testimony*, 117.
\(^{18}\) Ibid., 118.
past, and the witness does not actually speak for all others—the witness in The Plague is an ally and a healer to those who survive, and does honor to those who perish.  

Felman reads The Fall, in contrast, as the event decisively overtaking the ability to witness. A perhaps inevitable limit to human agency—narrative, witness, and relationality all ‘disintegrate’—is nonetheless portrayed as moral failure. The former defense attorney who witnesses a suicide and does nothing to stop it is unsure what he could have done: “I had forgotten what I thought then. Too late, too far, or something of the sort.” For Felman, this failure to act is more fundamentally a failure to witness, and a missed chance of “encounter with the real.” While The Plague allows for rather simple oppositional stances that enable one to side with the victims and against evil, The Fall disrupts this sense of moral security. The very position of ally is undermined by the location of “the roots of the disasters of contemporary history not in the evil of the enemies (some external bacillus of Plague) but, less predictably, in the betrayal of the friends.” While Felman reads Camus’ references to friendship as thinly covered lament about his conflicts with Sartre, it may be equally relevant to consider the allegorical implications of these comments as a critique of the reliability of political allyship.  

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19 Ibid., 118-9.
20 Ibid., 167.
21 Ibid., 169.
22 Ibid., 171.
23 These two matters were, in fact, entangled with one another, as Sartre and Camus reached intractable disagreement over how to narrate political culpability and responsibility with respect to World War II. Sartre maintained nostalgia for the Camus who was, to his mind, exemplary for the Resistance (ibid., 172-8).

What is most remarkable to me in this ambiguity is the way in which debates about the meaning and legacy of Camus’ work mirror those about Caruth. Was he writing works about the Holocaust that ignored other atrocities in its midst, or connecting disparate events through clever allegory? In Memory and Complicity, Debarati Sanyal also reads The Plague and The Fall, interpreting them in light of mixed commentary on Camus’ treatment, or for some lack of treatment, of colonialism. Her reference to these exchanges as ‘memory wars’ harkens back to the feminist contestations about trauma examined in the last chapter [Debarati Sanyal, Memory and
The Fall ought also, in Felman’s reading, to critique our impulses to approach the traumatic with expectations for salvation or redemption.

It is not simply that salvation has not, as yet, taken place. Rather, with the chance of rescue missed through a missed historical encounter with the real, the event seems to consist in the missing of salvation and, henceforth, in its radical historical and philosophical impossibility.24

The historical disaster that is ungraspable but still present, that compels a repetitive return to ‘the event’ even in attempts to turn away from it, is not significant as a starting point for redemptive narrative. The Fall is a moral collapse that has already happened, a failure of both will and action that haunts the psyche. Things could have been otherwise, but the...
chance for redemption is past.\textsuperscript{25} Felman thus deconstructs and rejects a salvific ideology that would put confident faith in testimony.\textsuperscript{26}

No narrative will be adequate to the real that was missed, and there is no way to regain the opportunity that was lost. The haunting and enduring sense that this condition was not inevitable, that it did not have to be this way, is cause for lament (this may be why Felman considers being wounded by history one did not live a significant ethical undertaking).\textsuperscript{27} It is also what Felman believes can drive ongoing ethical commitment, an awareness that leads to responsiveness. The past, missed possibility of salvation retains meaning even though it is gone.

While Caruth does not take up the question of salvation in these terms, the cry of the person who jumps from a bridge in \textit{The Fall} might parallel “the voice” that Caruth identifies with Tasso’s twice-slain Clorinda and “the moving and sorrowful voice that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released through the wound.”\textsuperscript{28} This voice issues

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\textsuperscript{25} This version of complicity has, in Sanyal’s view, become a ‘fetish’ that in fact obstructs a sense of responsibility by locating real blame always before and behind (Sanyal, \textit{Memory and Complicity}, 83). She argues that Camus’ portrayal of complicity in \textit{The Fall} must be read through its unreliable, manipulative narrator. Universal complicity is an ideological instrument for totalitarian coercion, justifying collusion by asserting that innocence is already lost and resistance is pointless (91-2). I do not think that this is where Felman’s version of complicity necessarily leads, but I take Sanyal’s point that nothing moral is necessarily gained by the observation or declaration that innocence is impossible.

\textsuperscript{26} Felman, \textit{Testimony}, 176.

\textsuperscript{27} See Felman’s first chapter, “Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching,” in \textit{Testimony}, 1-56.

\textsuperscript{28} Caruth, \textit{UE}, 2. This scene from Torquato Tasso’s epic \textit{Gerusalemme liberata}, as read by Freud and then Caruth, has been so frequently reexamined that I do not engage with it here in depth. Caruth returns to the story in her Afterword to the new edition of \textit{Unclaimed Experience} in order to contest charges that “what has come to be called ‘classical’ trauma theory” is Eurocentric in its methods and objects of study (117). She reaches back into Tasso’s text to discover another scene of address that is part of, but omitted from, the scene described by Freud. When Tancred comes upon the tree in the woods, where Clorinda undetectably resides, there is an inscription of “‘various symbols…like those which once in place of written signs/were used in ancient Egypt’s mystic shrines’” (Torquato Tasso, \textit{Gerusalemme liberata}, cited in Caruth, 136). Caruth argues that the writing on the tree may not have been Egyptian hieroglyphics, as is often assumed, but
from “the speaking wound” that represents and embodies trauma. This voice is not identical to theory or literary writing, and is better conveyed by figures than any attempt at narrative. Theoretical frameworks and literary thematics cannot contain or express trauma. Yet rhetoric and literary resonances can witness to trauma “beyond what we can know or theorize about it.” Felman suggests something similar in her statement that, “In *The Fall*, the event is witnessed insofar as it is *not experienced*, insofar as it is literally

“the writing of an extinct Ethiopian language” mentioned in Heliodorus’s *Aethiopica.* Clorinda is described as “born white,” and was reportedly given away by her Ethiopian mother who wrote hopes for her daughter’s survival on a ribbon that she sent with the infant (136–7). The writing on the ribbon is, in Caruth’s interpretation, the same writing that Tancred encounters etched into the tree. It is a real language that the reader cannot decipher, and Caruth presents this inscription as a metaphor for the ‘voice’ of trauma (137–8).

Several things stand out about this retelling of the story from the first edition of *Unclaimed Experience* as evidence that it is not—at least not fundamentally or irreparably—Eurocentric. One is its reliance on the reader’s willingness to read the 1996 text with a form of conscious or unconscious nachträglichkeit, to see the newly told presence of non-whiteness (a categorization that is not considered anachronistic in Caruth’s reading of ancient and 16th century sources) characters as somehow part of trauma theory from the start. One new danger that I detect is that of exoticization, that “the address of a language we cannot fully know” may only deepen concerns about romanticizing not knowing others and the Other. Furthermore, the assumption that the other’s trauma is (or is in) a language that could be decoded may ascribe something overly systematic, if not overly rational, to affective experience.

There is something compelling, however, about the embedded sense of futurity that Caruth reasserts in these comments. While in the original essays of *Unclaimed Experience* she oscillates between saying that trauma is unknowable and not *yet* known, here she declares that the voice is in “a language, enigmatic and resonant, that we must still learn to hear” (139). The learning that this statement demands, and its assertion that the unintelligible may make plenty of sense once we meet halfway, resonates with the ‘deep language learning’ that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak advocates as a component of aesthetic education (see Chapter 5). The notion that traumatized persons who occupy socially non-normative and subordinated positions might seem simply meaningless is a threat with which Bhanu Kapil, who also appears in the fifth chapter, grapples intensely.

What I ultimately find most fascinating about Caruth’s deep dig into the sources of Tasso’s epic is that it is still (for me, anyway) impossible to decide whether it is invested in inevitability or contingency. Is Caruth asserting that if one digs enough into any trauma, one will eventually find its mutual imbrications with otherness, and that this is why trauma cannot be culturally contained? Or, is this addition to the text meant primarily to vindicate the initial choice—her own, but also Freud’s—of Clorinda as the exemplary figure of woundedness that calls out for a response? Was the non-whiteness behind Clorinda’s ‘whiteness’ somehow present in these tellings from the start, and would this possibility refute concerns about the cultural or racial specificity of the theory that follows?

30 Ibid., 5.
This enigmatic statement affirms (or is affirmed by) Caruth’s argument that whatever matters most about trauma cannot be encountered directly.

Mortal Theory

In her attempt to articulate this non-occurrence of the traumatic, Caruth puts several kinds of Freudian trauma into play: trauma that issues from an individual’s early history or even prehistory, which is part of the founding of a subject, and trauma that arrives in the form of an ‘accident;’ “individual trauma” as theorized in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, and collectively experienced “historical trauma” as it appears in Moses and Monotheism. She juxtaposes these various traumas purposefully, claiming that only by considering them together can we “understand the full complexity of the problem of survival at the heart of human experience.”

Living constitutes an, albeit temporary, survival of one’s individual and transgenerational past, as well as the larger pasts to which one is culturally and historically tied.

If trauma leads us, however enigmatically, to ‘the heart of human experience,’ it would seem to occupy a necessary and inescapable place in subjectivity. This interpretation seems consonant with Caruth’s notion of ‘history as the history of trauma.’ At the same time, trauma for Caruth is clearly tied to specific events—the Holocaust, the bombing of Hiroshima, the death of one’s child. Are these two ways of regarding trauma fully compatible? And, if not, is it possible to simply say that one is correct, the other mistaken?

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31 Felman, Testimony, 168.
32 Caruth, in fact, uses this exact same language of missing and not experiencing to define trauma and how it operates.
33 Caruth, UE, 58.
Caruth’s book has been repeatedly assessed for its putative political morality, whether it colludes with or resists violent and oppressive forces. If one makes a sharp distinction between trauma as an extraordinary event and trauma as constitutive of subjectivity, language, and collective history, then Caruth is helpful or dangerous for theorizing about things that occur in the world. The terms of this setup also foreground her alliances and sincerity—whether she is more loyal to human suffering or linguistic theory, survivors of the Holocaust or her once-collaborating teacher Paul de Man.34 While I find it important to examine all of these possibilities, the absoluteness of each set of claims might itself be reason to pause. Is this primarily a debate about authorial intent or textual effects? If the latter, do we assume that these effects are themselves singular, stable, and fully knowable? Is concern about language incompatible with concern about suffering and catastrophe, and are these always entirely separate matters?

Shoshana Felman is perhaps the most ardent defender of Caruth’s (or her theory’s, the distinction is not entirely clear) concern for actual events. For Felman, an orientation to real catastrophes and their survivors is intrinsic to the study of trauma: “Trauma is, one might say, the event par excellence, the event as unintelligible, as the pure impact of sheer happening.” There is no chance that trauma can be absorbed into a structural notion of divisions within the subject because trauma always originates in discrete things that have happened. The event marks an “historic singularity,”35 and Felman insists that Caruth unambiguously ties the effects associated with trauma to such

34 The de Manian charge and its contestation flare up in the textual exchange between Ruth Leys and Shoshana Felman discussed below.
events. To read Caruth as merely a theorist of language, or as primarily concerned with describing universal characteristics of subjectivity, is an absurd proposition.

At the opposing pole of interpretation are those who see Caruth’s theory as not truly addressing or concerned with concrete historical events. Greg Forter, for instance, frames Caruth’s psychoanalytic readings as being about subjectivity in general, and dismisses as essentially ahistorical “the psychoanalytic redaction of original sin called the death drive.” Forter names Freud as the root of this misstep, claiming that he traded a theory of trauma that acknowledged violence committed in individuals’ history for “a theory that absolved him of historical guilt by tracing all human misery...to a non-historical or structural cause.” He interprets structural trauma to be trauma that never really happened, trauma that cannot really matter as such because it is intrinsic to the human psyche.

Forter worries that a disguised complacency underlies the embedding of trauma “in our inescapable linguistic entanglements.” While acknowledging that language is interwoven with structures and systems that can cause violence, he interprets Caruth’s theorization of trauma as being fundamentally (and so really) about language. Forter bases this reading on Caruth’s claim that what we can know of trauma is only knowable

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38 Ibid., 261. This resembles Herman’s reading of Freud when she asserts that he “stopped listening to his female patients” when he relinquished the seduction hypothesis of hysterical aetiology (Judith Herman, M.D., Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror (New York: Basic Books, 1992, 1997, 2015), 14).
39 I have no desire to defend the specific structures of subjectivity that Freud universalized, such as the Oedipal complex. Yet I would contest the argument that Freud’s structural traumas were entirely ahistorical, since the shared traumas he hypothesized could still be located historically in individuals’ lives. The psyche in Freud’s writing was not something that appeared fully formed, and trauma could both drive and interfere with psychic development.
40 Forter, 261.
through repetition, or through reenactments that attest to traumatization: “This repetition happens precisely by virtue of our common linguistic condition: through our talking and listening, our reading and writing—in short, our very being-in-language.” Trauma comes to be regarded as inevitable, and this drains any impulse to resist its occurrence or combat its causes.

Both Felman and Forter’s interpretations can be supported by Caruth’s text, even as they each depend for their persuasiveness on ignoring the other’s evidence. Perhaps one source of the impasse is their shared deployment of theory in ways that rely heavily on a binary structure of argument. This model of thought and critique tends to interpret a text as good or bad, true or false, correct or mistaken. Judgments about theory’s value are then primarily a matter of how they align with how one already sees the world. The point is not that we can fully avoid this kind of thinking; the concerns through which we read theory, and those that lead us to theory, matter greatly. Without directly disputing either Felman’s or Forter’s reading, then, the present chapter stages an experiment by revisiting a portion of this much debated text with renewed curiosity. I aim to reencounter its idiosyncrasies, while postponing an analysis of whether Caruth gets trauma right or wrong.

*Coming Late to History*

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41 Ibid., 282.
42 Dominick LaCapra writes about the problems with structuralizing trauma and failing to separate structural trauma from losses that occur in history. He implies but does not state that he associates Caruth with this theoretical move [Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001, 2014), 80, 84].
Caruth’s introduction to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, the collection of essays she edited and published in 1995, is helpful for its concise summation of the frameworks at issue. She locates herself and her audience in “a catastrophic age,” and observes from the start that the clinical category of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) “has provided a category of diagnosis so powerful that it has seemed to engulf everything around it.” Caruth sees survivors of trauma as carriers of an unknown history that belongs to the social and political world in which they live, rather than only to themselves. The diagnosis applies to individuals who are “possessed by an image or an event,” but traumatic symptoms do not merely chart their unconscious psychic lives. The ‘literality’ of flashbacks and nightmares reenact traumatic happenings and signal “an overwhelming occurrence that then remains, in its insistent return, absolutely true to the event.” An individual’s PTSD is a symptom of history that has not been received or processed on either an individual or social level.

History as a history of trauma is similarly dislocated, its most drastic and decisive events subject to delays in experience that defy chronology and narration. “The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess.” By drawing attention to the limits of our understanding and access to history, trauma demonstrates a

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44 Given that this collection was published only one year before *Unclaimed Experience*, its introduction belongs to roughly the same ‘moment’ in Caruth’s thought and I will assume their continuity.
46 Ibid., 3.
47 Ibid., 5.
48 Ibid., 9.
49 Ibid.
generally applicable form of truth. And it follows that trauma is not containable in either a single person or the time of a single, locatable event. For Caruth, this is trauma’s disruptive and tragic transhistorical force. Yet she hopes that “[t]he meaning of the trauma’s address beyond itself” might enable a “link between cultures” that could acknowledge “the departures we have all taken from ourselves.”

There is, then, a constant slide between the individual and the collective. Events that cause traumatic responses must be considered in their particularity to understand how trauma operates. But Caruth carefully argues that

[T]he pathology cannot be defined either by the event itself—which may or may not be catastrophic, and may not traumatize everyone equally—or can it be defined in terms of a distortion of the event…The pathology consists, rather, solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it [italics original].

Terrible events are often traumatic, but Caruth insists that an event’s status as traumatizing can vary between people, that it is a result of ‘missing’ the experience as it happens. This individual frame expands into the claim that history is made up of these events that were not experienced in their own time. This account of temporality makes a certain intuitive sense for those accustomed to thinking genealogically. If our histories are histories of the present, then history is what continues happening in the present because its initial happening did not fully occur—it is not over, and has not become properly past. The history that is relevant as history, the past that keeps taking shape in ways that defy easy recognition, constitutes sites of ongoing struggle. We are haunted by

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50 Ibid., 11.
51 Ibid., 4.
52 What, exactly, it means to not experience an event is only roughly defined even though it is central to how Caruth identifies trauma. Does ‘missing’ exist in opposition to fully having an experience, and is this full presence to or possession of experience something that ever really occurs?
the past; but the past is, in a sense, haunted by our late arrival to that which has not been adequately witnessed.53

It is perhaps easy to see how we become intimate with collective histories that haunt, and how structures of exploitation and entrenched inequalities carry historical violence into the present in ways that shape individual lives. It may be more difficult to understand how intimate and personal historical tragedies accumulate into something grandly called ‘history,’ or how any broad reference to that history could invite real witness to overlooked trauma. That, at any rate, is a problem that worries interpreters like Forter. Add to this the premises of deconstructive and performative approaches to language that Caruth also adopts— that any account of the past takes shape through its belated telling, and that nothing said refers in a straightforward way to ‘reality.’ There are understandable concerns that what postures as a theory of trauma may again ‘miss’ trauma entirely. My claim, in its simplest formulation, is that these possibilities worry Caruth too.

*Resisting the Fall*

Favorable and unfavorable interpreters who draw opposing conclusions about Caruth’s work all assume the ethical importance of recognizing the singularity of traumatic events and evaluate Caruth’s theory for its success or failure at this recognition. As I have written, I wish to take a different approach to this controversy through a close reading of the fourth chapter of *Unclaimed Experience*, entitled “The Falling Body and

53 Caruth’s use of *Nachträglichkeit* as belated occurrence resembles Laplanche’s liberally Freudian notion of ‘afterwardsness’ [Jean LaPlanche, *Essays on Otherness* (London, New York: Routledge, 1999)]. Yet her theory also seems to point to something closer to what Freud described, the ways that ongoing attempts at narration constantly revise our understanding of the past. My thanks to Amy Hollywood for helping to clarify this point.
the Impact of Reference.” I read this chapter as Caruth’s attempt to counteract the
tendency many see in her work to frame all of life as traumatic. She aims to demonstrate
that, while it would be a mistake “to identify experience with trauma,” something in the
way that Paul de Man theorizes reference helps us to understand the ubiquity of
“traumatic possibility.”

Although this would seem an important qualification to her entire enterprise, Caruth only makes this argument in a footnote to the section of her introduction that refers to the fourth chapter. The chapter itself never uses the word ‘trauma,’ even though this footnote about it indicates that the chapter addresses “the problem, central to the study of trauma, of its specificity or uniqueness.” In this section, I will bring this argument, made fleetingly in footnotes, into the foreground. Examining what appears to be a chapter about theories of language and narrative, I will ask how Caruth is tacitly relating “the necessity, and failure, of theory” to trauma and to experience.

Caruth, like de Man, recites and refuses a vague but accusatory skepticism about poststructuralist (and structuralist) theories of language. While unnamed objectors fear that “language about language” negates any possible reference to history or reality, Caruth claims that by forging distinctions between reference and natural law, between constative and performative language, de Man’s deconstructive theory prevents “history

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54 Caruth, UE, n.5, 114-5.
55 Ibid., n.5, 114.
56 Ibid., 90.
from being swallowed up by the power of abstraction.” She follows de Man in refusing the possibility of a simple account of reference as correspondence, reminding the reader of his important “recognition that direct or phenomenal reference to the world means, paradoxically, the production of a fiction.” Theoretical language, in refusing to construct such a fiction, seems to refuse all reference. But Caruth will find in de Man an encounter with reference (itself a collision) that occurs when theory admits its inability to offer full representation.

The persistent gap between language and ‘the world’ could itself be seen as a fallen state. But Caruth, like de Man, is here concerned with Kant’s attempt to set transcendental philosophy apart from and above the empirical world. Pure philosophy “knows itself as that which does not directly know the empirical object [italics original].” And yet, philosophy’s knowledge about its own “inability to refer to bodies” is explained through a metaphor of philosophy as a human body. De Man looks, in the passage Caruth quotes, at Kant’s comments on “the architectonic of pure reason” in the Critique of Pure Reason. Describing the structure of “the unity of the manifold of cognitions” as a ‘systematic’ one, Kant envisions a body made up of parts whose proportions and relative positions are fixed a priori. “The whole is therefore articulated

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58 Caruth, UE, 74.  
59 Ibid., 76.  
60 De Man famously pointed to this refusal in relation to pedagogy, arguing that “it is better to fail in teaching what should not be taught than to succeed in teaching what is not true” (“The Resistance to Theory,” 4).  
61 There is a suggestive possibility of reading Lacan’s account of the subject’s division in language as a quasi-theological fallen state. A Lacanian theorization of language as given in Seminar XX does indeed seem implicitly present in much of Caruth’s chapter on de Man, Kant, and Kleist. While it is not the project of the present chapter, it would be interesting to consider how her discussion of de Man’s fall that accidentally refers relates to her turn to Lacan in the following chapter to examine the demand for ‘awakening’ posed by contact with the real (Caruth, UE, 91-112).  
62 Caruth, UE, 78.
(articulatio) and not heaped together (coacervatio). Caruth reads this to mean that one exchanges reference to an empirical body for “the presumably upright body of the philosophical system.”

De Man plays off of this body in his reading of Kleist’s short story Über das Marionettentheater (On the Marionette Theater). Herr C--, puppeteer and popular opera dancer, explains to the narrator that each move his puppets dance has its own center of gravity. The limbs are dead weight, their “purely mechanical” moves the pinnacle of grace. The puppets’ dance, read as a metaphor for Kant’s system, is simultaneously human and inhuman, its perfection “the result of the union between the mechanical puppet and the particular agency who directs.” The dance stands for a written text, with the writer figured as puppeteer. The mechanics of this dance, which are a “transformation of puppeteer-held strings into puppet motions,” constitute the “primary referential relation behind the text.” The dance itself, however, performs a nonreferential system—something calculable and, most importantly, immortal.

But why this idealization of a nonreferential system in the first place? In a rather ingenious expansion of de Man’s theory, Caruth argues that the concept of gravity called for a reformulation of “a world thought to be governed entirely by motion, a world whose

64 Caruth, UE, 79.
65 “The limbs that function as nothing more than a pendulum, swinging freely” are graceful precisely because they have no life of their own that would pull against gravity [Heinrich von Kleist, “On the Marionette Theater,” trans. by Thomas G. Neumiller, in The Drama Review: TDR 16, no. 3 (Sep. 1972): 22-6.]
66 Caruth, UE, 80.
67 Or, perhaps better, Kant’s thwarted hope for a system that is smoothed over by interpreters such as Schiller.
68 Caruth, UE, 80.
69 Ibid., 81.
phenomenal coherence as motion would come to an end toward the close of the seventeenth century [italics original].” Newton turned “the world of motion” into “quite literally, a world of falling” with the observation that objects in the universe fall toward one another. In a sweeping and evocative statement, Caruth claims that “the history of philosophy after Newton could be thought of as a series of confrontations with the question of how to talk about falling.” De Man, in Caruth’s account, consequently frames the problem of reference as one of “how to talk about falling [italics original].” This problem belongs distinctly to philosophy, in the sense that falling could be mathematically, but not theoretically, accounted for. “That is, as a mathematical formula it could be applied perfectly to the world, but as a thing referred to by philosophical discourse it seemed a pure fiction.”

This failure of reference, the recognition that “reference could not adequately describe the world,” is Caruth’s bridge to reread Kant’s distinction between theoretical language and the empirical world. In de Man, the puppet body seems to defy gravity. It represents philosophy’s apparent transcendence of reference, “a system that easily exchanges rising for falling, life for death, because all are equally free of referential weight.” There is, for one enthralled by such a system, no fall of any consequence,

70 Ibid., 75.
71 Ibid., 75-6.
72 Ibid., 76.
73 And Caruth is careful to repeatedly note that this is her interpretation.
74 Caruth, UE 76.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid., 77.
77 Ibid., 83.
because falling for a puppet “is only a means of rising.” The philosophical system performs a resilience that covers over the mortality of the philosopher.

This notion of a teleological fall that occurs only in service of a rise harkens back to Caruth’s early assertion that trauma can be a link between cultures. Does trauma have an inherent purpose that we can tap into if only we can align ourselves with its aims? I do not think that Caruth would make such a claim. But the idea that trauma could carry within itself political possibility is a challenging one. Later in my analysis I will turn to the necessity of imagination and relational risk-taking in order to bring such (perhaps limited) possibilities into being. But this section is an encounter with a theory about external causes that carries important questions regarding the extent to which we see the effects of a fall (or the Fall) as predetermined and redemptive.

In an earlier analysis of Kant in *Empirical Truths and Critical Fictions*, Caruth suggests that philosophy’s (apparent) immortality is structured as a sacrifice. Reading Kant’s *Foundations*, Caruth observes that matter’s inability to determine its own actions from an internal principle (the law of inertia) and the idea that motion must have an external cause (Newton’s first law, reformulated in Kant’s second law of mechanics) indicate matter’s lifelessness. The lifeless puppets rely on an external cause for their dance. The lifelessness of the system refers to a presumed inevitability in how it proceeds. This is, perhaps counterintuitively, tied to “the relational quality of all conceptual knowledge.” The system is presumed fixed and closed because it has no direct knowledge of objects and can only proceed by relating concepts to each other and by

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78 Ibid., 82.
positing a relationship to ultimate ends or a Supreme Being.\(^\text{80}\) Philosophy cannot accommodate matter that has its own causes of motion, its own life (what would happen to the arc of the puppets’ leaps if they began to move in tension with the pulls of the strings?). In the face of what philosophy cannot explain, namely falling, “matter dies, it would appear, \textit{so that} philosophy can have life.”\(^\text{81}\)

Yet what does it mean to say that matter is sacrificed? The sacrificial relation in Kant’s text is, Caruth argues, Christological. She cites a footnote in \textit{Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone} in which Kant asserts that humans require analogies in order to apprehend supersensible aspects of morality. When scriptures attribute a sacrifice that we can sensibly understand as ultimate to God, they invoke an analogical structure that allows us to understand God’s love.\(^\text{82}\)

If we reexamine the exemplary relation between transcendental philosophy and metaphysics in terms of the workings of the symbol, the narrative that emerges in the former—the death of matter for philosophy—appears to retell, or repeat, the symbolic sacrifice. Force, or the conceptualization of motion as continually falling, must be read not only in reference to a scientific calculation, but also in reference to the ‘fall’ narrated in the symbol.\(^\text{83}\)

Humanity’s fall leads to the need for sacrifice, a sacrifice given ultimate representation in the ‘symbol of symbol’ that is Christ’s death.\(^\text{84}\) But the sacrifice is inevitably either a failure or incomplete. In Caruth’s interpretation of the Christ story, the sacrificed child (Christ) could not properly be loved in the way he should be for the operation of sacrifice to be effective. A child who exists \textit{a priori} to be sacrificed for another is not loved for his

\(^{80}\) What is very much at stake in this discussion is Kant’s positing of the supersensible realm of understanding, and with it of a Supreme Being, or God. Humans can only think, not know, God and the supersensible. What they think is always relational in the sense that thinking of a Supreme Being derives from the operation of thinking itself (69, 73).

\(^{81}\) Ibid., 69.

\(^{82}\) Ibid., 78-9.

\(^{83}\) Ibid., 83.

\(^{84}\) Ibid., 79.
own sake, which calls into question the analogical reasoning that would posit Christ as God’s beloved child.\textsuperscript{85} There is no evidence that Caruth is attempting to make a theological claim. What is significant for Caruth’s overall argument is that Kant’s system reaches an impasse just as it purportedly meets the needs of human understanding. The analogy breaks down over an interpretation of sacrifice; someone who exists only in order to be sacrificed cannot be beloved in the way that sacrifice requires.\textsuperscript{86}

For de Man, the system’s breakdown results from a materiality that becomes evident in theory’s reliance on performativity. The external cause of the puppets’ movements implants “a primary referential relation” that is never fully overcome.\textsuperscript{87} If the “dead passivity” of the puppets’ limbs make the dance possible, de Man also insists that between their suspension and the downward pull of gravity, “some resistance” is already felt.\textsuperscript{88} For philosophy, this resistance comes in the form of performative language that indisputably acts.\textsuperscript{89} The relevant fall is not the incommensurability of language with reality, or even the inaccessibility of the real, but the fall that occurs when ostensibly pure philosophy encounters “the reassertion of reference” in its own process of thinking.\textsuperscript{90} The passive voice and the personification of philosophy raise the question of whose language is at stake. Thinking, acting, and falling, as will become evident below, point to the indispensability of an embodied theorist who speaks, acts, and performs.

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 81.
\textsuperscript{86} This resonates with Keshgegian’s theological remark that “Jesus was not born only to suffer and die” [Flora Keshgegian, \textit{Redeeming Memories: A Theology of Healing and Transformation} (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000)].
\textsuperscript{87} Caruth, \textit{UE}, 81.
\textsuperscript{89} Caruth, \textit{UE}, 87.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 83.
Caruth writes that, “trauma is suffered in the psyche precisely, it would seem, because it is not directly available to experience.” Yet she simultaneously endorses theories of language as providing only indirect access to any experience. Language’s inability to evade all reference comes from a fall that could perhaps be called a stumble, a disruption of grace that calls attention to language’s own action. Language that indicates trauma by showing the limits of its own system would be a flash of directness, an availability to experience that works through and beyond language’s formal structure. And such language comes about in the stories philosophy must tell, stories that indicate that there is life in matter and that the sacrifice to philosophy is always incomplete:

The story that emerges at the joints of the system tells of the impossibility for the language of the system to close upon itself in its representation, a nonclosure that appears as the irrevocable “priority” of an event.

The event thus receives priority within theory, and the impact of the event is felt through theory’s openness and vulnerability. It would seem that insofar as it is not mediated by language, trauma is psychically available in an unmediated (Caruth would say ‘literal’) way. At the same time, what is not mediated by language cannot really belong to recognizable life.

Theory’s fall represents a mortality that is directly connected to the mortality of the bodies from which it issues and by which it is read. For Caruth, theory’s vulnerability becomes most apparent in the study of trauma, in which politically and morally necessary

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91 Ibid., 61.
92 Perhaps we need to leave open the possibility that the only way to guarantee one will not refer to trauma is to use the word ‘trauma.’ Writer Mg Roberts put it this way, recalling her experience at a conference on “Trauma and Catharsis” in an interview with Bhanu Kapil: “I’m thinking of the way stories and the embodiments of ideas have the ability to misshape. To trivialize as in appropriate the manifestation of person or concept…How to talk of equivalency and say, No!”<http://jackkerouacispunjabi.blogspot.com/2015/09/friday-interview-series-mg-roberts.html> [accessed 27 September 2015]
93 Caruth, ETCF, 83.
insights are always just beyond the reach of articulation. Whether this is a tragedy, or is only tragedy, is far from certain. From de Man’s perspective, Kant’s failure to achieve systematic completion in *Critique of Judgment* is, for theory, a form of grace: “Thus Kant would have forever ended the play of philosophy, let alone the play of art, if the project of transcendental philosophy had succeeded in determining once and forever the limits of our faculties and of our freedom.” And yet, the opening (the wound?) in theory that is so crucial to its vitality and experimental potential does, as Caruth points out, feed on the vulnerability and woundedness of the theorist, her own exposure to traumatic possibility.

Within the above referenced work by Kleist, often read as his triumphant “spiritual autobiography,” de Man senses a more tragic and sinister pull. The story of the marionettes occurs in a series of scenes that have been read, in total, to represent his “overcoming a series of crises, victories over ‘Todeserlebnisse.'” In contrast, de Man cites Kleist’s “innocuous-looking notation” that signals the winter of 1801 in *Über das Marionettentheater*, written in 1810. A series of stories that could well be about linguistic signification and reference is, de Man agrees, a conscious or unconscious autobiography. But it is far from victorious. The hopelessness of language, that “(i)t always refers but never to the right referent,” parallels the crisis by which Kleist, in a series of events that De Man calls “randomly overdetermined confusion,” loses all in a failed attempt at sacrifice: “Kleist, who had wanted to be, in a sense like Kant and who, one might conjecture, had to give up Wilhelmine in order to achieve this aim, found himself replaced as husband, by Krug, who also, as teacher philosopher, replaced

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94 De Man, “AFK,” 283.
95 Ibid., 283.
96 It is, in fact, rather boldly positioned in the opening line (Kleist, 22).
98 Ibid., 285.
Kant.” De Man speculates that the self-awareness by which Kleist could have connected his theoretical and romantic tortures might have been his salvation. That this understanding never came within his reach lends intrigue to his text, but was (in de Man’s rather dizzying speculation) his personal undoing.100

But this framing of the philosopher as sacrifice limits its scope of concern to one body. The story of matter dying as a sacrifice to philosophy, or of God sacrificing one child for another, might indeed be an ethical call to recognize that thinking does not escape death. For Caruth, theory’s fall is bound to the potential of actual bodies to ‘fall,’ to suffer or die. Theory registers traumatic possibility because it always refers back to these bodies, however unintentionally. There might also be a warning, however, about the ease with which we can turn one another into non-agential symbols. Enthralled with our own action in language, it would be easy to neglect the question of what such universal claims have to do with particular contexts and events. This is, to some extent, a reiteration of questions insistently posed by Caruth’s skeptical readers. I hope that I have shown the extent to which they also preoccupy Caruth, even if we might desire other strategies for working through them.

**Persuasion, Reference, and Aesthetics**

Kleist is not the theorist of his own story, which is only witnessed in retrospect by de Man and Caruth. The role of ‘witness’ may undo the theorist who tries to make sense of the magnitude, illogic, and cruelty associated with trauma. But there is also an object of witness who has her own claims to subjectivity. An ethical question arises from de

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100 De Man, “AFK,” 284.
Man’s treatment of Kleist and extends to theory more broadly: What is the ethical valence of using of others’ vulnerability as a means for approaching our own?

In contrast to the cohesive and articulated body that served as architectonic metaphor for pure reason, Kant’s aesthetic view of the body demands that one regard each part without “‘the concepts of the purposes which all our limbs serve.’” Pure aesthetic judgment cannot assume the unity and ends that necessarily ground pure reason. It ‘dismembers’ and takes apart, not only bodies, but language. Reduced to, or maybe revealed as, materiality, the language of philosophy comes unhinged from its conceptual telos. Tropes progressively disassemble into sentences, then words, then syllables and letters. What is finally persuasive in Kant’s Critique of Judgment, de Man argues, is not the method that constructs an interdependent, predictably proportioned body. Rather, it is the sound and shape of words in the reader’s body: the reader will accept that sublime shock can turn into reverent regard because of “the proximity between the German words for surprise and admiration, ‘Verwunderung’ and ‘Bewunderung.’” The imagination overwhelmed in the face of the sublime and its simultaneous ability to somehow work in favor of reason does not, de Man claims, become an acceptable claim through logical argument. Rather, we are “made to assent to this because of a constant, and finally bewildering alternation of the two terms, ‘Angemessenheit’ and ‘Unangemessenheit,’ to the point where one can no longer tell them apart.” For de Man, this is not an aesthetic function of language, but rather a rhetorical one. “The phenomenality of the

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102 Ibid., 88-9.
103 Kant writes of a ‘wild man’ who, looking at a house, does not perceive a place to dwell, but “merely sees” in a way that resembles “pure aesthetic vision” (de Man, “PMK,” 81-2).
104 De Man, “PMK,” 89.
105 Ibid., 89-90.
signifier” serves to connect “the name and the thing named,” but this connection is a conventional one that does not reflect “the nature of the world.” That is, nonlinguistic material phenomenality is canceled out by linguistic materiality.

This is the “materialism” that de Man believes Kant’s readers tend to neglect. By over-exerting their “philosophical energy or rational power,” they miss the ways in which the theory requires engagement from the bodies of those who receive it. Caruth’s study of trauma aims to register the ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ that escape linguistic expression. But in spite of Caruth’s extensive engagement with de Man, she seems to miss the way in which what can be registered as a truth outside of language may still be about language, may be primarily an effect of language’s materiality. For de Man, this “freedom from referential restraint” signals that we are in the domain of the literary.

While it may seem odd to suggest that Kant’s attempts at systematicity produce literariness, de Man’s identification of “literature as the place where this negative knowledge about the

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106 De Man, “Resistance to Theory,” 10. De Man is writing here about Roland Barthes’ notion of the writer as one who subscribes to a ‘secular myth’ that signs imitate ideas. When combined with de Man’s remarks in “Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant,” there is the intriguing suggestion that reading Kant requires thinking like a writer.

107 Commenting on the narrative of fall and sacrifice that produces a ‘symbol of symbol,’ Caruth notes that the ‘force’ that constitutes a continual fall is an event that occurs internal to the system itself. “The narrative that emerges in this figuration says very little indeed about the empirical world as such, and a good deal about the ‘externality’ of the system to itself” (ETCF, 84). The step that would remain in a de Manian reading would be to reflect on how the operation of the system is inescapably in the empirical world. Caruth may come closest to this view when she notes “the incomprehensible agency of the letter in Kleist’s life,” which seems to lend uncanny logic and consistency to events that would seem impossible to logically tie together (UE, 86).


109 De Man calls literariness “the use of language that foregrounds the rhetorical over the grammatical and the logical function” (“Resistance to Theory,” 13). It is not clear to me what relation literariness plays to the counterfactual, or how this account of rhetoric might relate to fictionality.
reliability of linguistic utterance is made available"\textsuperscript{110} strongly resembles the ‘fall’ that Caruth argues occurs within Kant’s theory.

But literariness, de Man observes, is no guarantee of greater proximity to whatever ought to be called truth or reality. Literature’s status as fiction follows from the fact that its structures are not guaranteed to be those “of the phenomenal world. It is therefore not \textit{a priori} certain that literature is a reliable source of information about anything but its own language.”\textsuperscript{111} Self-consciously literary language also does not pretend to be pure reason. De Man defines literariness as “the use of language that foregrounds the rhetorical over the grammatical and logical function.”\textsuperscript{112} This statement points to a shift of attention from language’s structure to its effects. While language may be commenting on itself and playing off internal relationships and resonances, it only operates through a reader. Recalling de Man’s argument that we make what \textit{feel} like logical connections through words that sound the same, it is important to ask what ethical significance these theories of language can claim.

In de Man, the performative dimension that disrupts linguistic continuity implicates the Kantian sublime, a realm in which “language frees itself of its constraints and discovers within itself a power no longer dependent on the restrictions of cognition.”\textsuperscript{113} Caruth quotes a proximate passage in de Man that cites the \textit{Critique of Judgment}, but makes no mention of the role of the sublime in either Kant or de Man’s theories. The trajectory of Kant’s third critique as it moves from Kant to Schiller, and

\textsuperscript{110} De Man, “Resistance to Theory,” \textsuperscript{10}.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., \textsuperscript{11}.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., \textsuperscript{14}.
\textsuperscript{113} De Man, “PMK,” \textsuperscript{79}. This remark aligns with de Man’s observation, noted above, that rhetoric can deploy the materiality of language to bypass logical processes. Note, however, that the freedom of language seems at least a potential threat to the free operation of reason.
from de Man into Spivak’s reformulation of aesthetic education, will be explored in the fourth chapter. For now, two characteristics of the Kantian sublime as outlined by de Man are especially relevant. The first is that the sublime is initially experienced as “shock or…astonishment that borders on terror,” a “terror is transformed into a feeling of tranquil superiority.” The second is that in order to experience this transformation, the subject must be safe from any actual threat. The overcoming of “this delectable, because imaginary, terror” ultimately submits the imagination to reason. While de Man does not believe that Kant achieves the analytical closure that he claims (“we are hardly dealing with a tight analytical argument”), de Man here finds another story of sacrifice—that of the imagination to and for reason. Such sacrifice implies a recuperation that can be read as redeeming and justifying loss.

To what extent is Caruth’s critical theory of trauma recapitulating Kantian notions of sublimity, and to what extent does this form of trauma theory regard ‘other people’s pain’ as an occasion for self-cultivation? What are the political and ethical implications of this dynamic? Forer fears that trauma theory derived from Caruth’s work pursues a Kantian-type feeling of risk within actual safety, but also that readers may believe that they actually experience trauma on par with that experienced by people in the situations to which a text refers.

It is as if the proposition that we can best know trauma by being traumatized, and that the best kind of text about trauma will therefore transmit trauma “itself” rather than

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114 Ibid., 84.
115 Ibid., 85.
116 Ibid., 85-6.
117 Ibid., 86.
118 Ibid., 86-7. De Man also notes that this sacrifice is a gendered one, with the imagination a tragic feminine heroine (87).
119 Ibid., 87.
120 Wording taken from Martin Modlinger and Philipp Sonntag, eds., cited above.
knowledge about it, makes it possible for critics to embrace an aestheticized despair while construing that embrace as political wisdom.\textsuperscript{121}

The question for Caruth’s text might be formulated in something like this way: When does a conception of trauma as history or history as the history of trauma begin to get in the way of its own project? At what point does a theory intended to draw attention to history’s unfinished workings and denials end up homogenizing events, trauma, and suffering? The answers to these questions are likely contingent, and may depend as much on the readers as the writer. At any rate, Caruth’s suggestion that trauma could be a bridge across differences that might otherwise lead to isolation tries to draw back from a purely aesthetic view that would ‘only see’ trauma.

In his essay “Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant,” de Man describes Kant’s alignment of the dynamical sublime with “pure aesthetic judgment” that divorces itself from concepts and teleology.\textsuperscript{122} An experience with the sublime that ‘merely sees’ resonates with Caruth’s description of the literality of traumatic experience and repetitions. Both refer to excess that defies interpretation and understanding, and that nonetheless has affective and imaginative impact. The sublime is troubling, and its proximity to something like abjection makes it a site of intense feeling and deep ambivalence.\textsuperscript{123}

Out of the pain of the failure to constitute the sublime by making the infinite apparent (\textit{unschaulich}) is born the pleasure of the imagination, which discovers, in this very failure, the congruity of its law (which is a law of failure) with the law of our own suprasensory being.\textsuperscript{124}

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\textsuperscript{121} Forter, 282.
\textsuperscript{122} De Man, “PMK,” 81-2.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 74.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 76.
\end{flushleft}
Understandably, Caruth keeps discussions of sublimity and pleasure at arm’s length. But could one ask her question “What does it mean to survive” without compelling imaginative engagement?125 Insofar as the sublime in Kant indicates an overwhelming encounter that becomes a boon to creativity, it could describe many forms of working through trauma. It may be that Caruth is anxious not to suggest that trauma is only a means of sublimity (that falling is only a means of rising). It may also be that theory’s sublimity sits uneasily with the ethical project Caruth attempts, one that is heavily invested in the witness and her orientation toward the other.

Caruth covers over how an interest in witnessing that makes the witness’ morality and subjectivity its primary concern does in fact risk missing that reality altogether. In Kant’s version of the sublime, one comes to reflect not on the sublimity of an object, but on the sublime within oneself.126 The witness may have a profound encounter through proximity to suffering, but some means of reaching beyond oneself to the other would be necessary for the ameliorative impact that Caruth ultimately envisions for trauma theory.127

**Art and Lies**

As Caruth’s later work, *Literature in the Ashes of History*, makes clear, she draws an important distinction between the striving of non-referential literary language and the cynicism of ‘the modern lie.’ History as the history of trauma is unavailable to experience

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125 Caruth, *UE*, 60.
127 Caruth expresses hope that trauma theory can help us to “learn,…not only to ease suffering but to open, in the individual and the community, new possibilities for change, a change that would acknowledge the unthinkable realities to which traumatic experience bears witness” (“Preface,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ix).
and language, and Caruth holds that this is in part because of direct political denial in the form of “erasure or lack of witness.”\textsuperscript{128} She builds on Hannah Arendt’s identification of the modern lie as pervasive, deliberate deceptions that are fabricated to override ‘factual truth.’\textsuperscript{129} The scandal of the Pentagon Papers, for instance, was that they revealed that the Vietnam War was ‘sold’ and carried out through “the process of lying itself.”\textsuperscript{130} Liars have a political advantage over those who attempt to tell the truth insofar as “our ability to lie—but not necessarily to tell the truth—belongs among the few obvious, demonstrable data that confirm human freedom.”\textsuperscript{131} This is clearly an un-Kantian definition of freedom, and it carries an amoral orientation that prioritizes “a replacement of reality” in the interest of controlling human action on a large scale.\textsuperscript{132} There is, moreover, an aesthetic element of “image-making” that is dually implicated: “if the public relations managers make images to sell the war, the problem-solvers make war to sustain an image.”\textsuperscript{133} But there is an almost contagious element to the ‘de-factualization’ that Arendt traces. Actions are no longer performed in order to exercise power, but to maintain an image of power, and this disconnects them from their very real consequences.\textsuperscript{134} Writing about trauma in contemporary contexts is, Caruth suggests, a writing against this denial, erasure, and covering over of violence. It testifies not only to

\textsuperscript{128} Cathy Caruth, \textit{Literature in the Ashes of History} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 39; referred to hereafter as Caruth, \textit{LAH}.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 40-1.
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 44-5.
\textsuperscript{132} Puppets reappear in an even more sinister vein, as the erasure of history creates “a world of marionettes acting in entirely predictable and mechanical ways” (Caruth, \textit{LAH}, 43).
\textsuperscript{133} Caruth, \textit{LAH}, 45.
\textsuperscript{134} Here Arendt is writing about the bombing of Hiroshima, identified as “the beginning of a certain mode of image-making, a beginning that erases itself as such in this very process…The bomb is not dropped in order to wield power that would allow for victory, but rather for the ‘pursuit of a mere image of omnipotence’ that lies in the future” (Arendt, “Lying,” 39, 43; cited in Caruth, \textit{LAH}, 49).
violence and suffering, but also to their compounding by the fact that “history is regularly and systematically denied.” The trauma theorist bears witness to what is irrecoverable by staging encounters with the lack of knowledge generated when official narratives become unhinged from factuality in this way.

Theorizing about trauma entails intense moral pressures that, even when falling short of declarations about truth and falsity, involve critiques of the theorist’s subjective sincerity. In the situations Arendt describes, political actors purposefully and flagrantly mislead. Even though they do not retain full control over the effects of their speech acts, the denials they perform spread traumatic effects beyond immediate victims and into broader societal discourse and imagination. Ruth Leys accuses Caruth of misleading her readers by way of a selective and ideologically driven reading of Freud. With phrasing that strangely echoes the concerns Caruth expresses in reading Arendt, Leys claims that *Unclaimed Experience* is committed “to making victimhood unlocatable in any particular person or place.” According to Leys, Caruth elides, or covers over, the distinction between victims and perpetrators by conflating Tancred and Clorinda’s positions in Freud’s retelling of Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata*. As referenced above, Tancred accidentally kills his beloved, mistaking her for an enemy in combat, and then wounds her again by slashing a tree that turns out to contain her soul. Tancred witnesses the wounds he inflicts, and he is also haunted by the repetition of the initial event in a way that Caruth aligns with surviving trauma.

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135 Caruth, *LAH*, 40.
136 *Trauma: A Genealogy* was published before *Literature in the Ashes of History*, and is therefore only responding to Caruth’s earlier works.
137 Leys, 296.
While Leys is correct that Caruth does not clearly designate Tancred as perpetrator and Clorinda as victim, the moral reprehensibility Leys attaches to this omission reproduces a problematic demand already encountered in certain sections of Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery*. That is, Leys would require that in order to be a properly recognizable subject of trauma, one would be a ‘victim’ with at least relative innocence to a ‘perpetrator.’ Leys does not consider the possibility of perpetrator trauma, and hyperbolically concludes that Caruth would excuse Nazis by allowing “the ‘cries’ of the Jews” to testify to Nazis’ trauma.\(^{139}\)

Felman’s above-cited defense of Caruth accuses Leys of something like lying, of a “falsifying institutionalization of the stakes of trauma studies” and “falsification of the work of Freud himself.”\(^{140}\) She asserts that “Caruth’s theory of trauma is…radically Other oriented,” and suggests that Leys means to draw attention away from the real suffering attached to trauma, focusing instead on academic debates that are ‘trivial’ by comparison.\(^{141}\)

Felman takes special aim at what Leys calls ‘mimetic identification,’ a tendency Leys sees alternating with anti-mimesis in Freud’s work and in the history of trauma theory generally.\(^{142}\) Felman objects to Leys’ fears that a performative trauma theory conflates victims and perpetrators, stating decisively that “…we are in no such danger, and if we were, no flat moralizing could protect us from it.”\(^{143}\) This declaration of certainty may be yet another defense against suspicions that Caruth is simply producing

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\(^{139}\) Leys, 297.

\(^{140}\) Felman, *Juridical Unconscious*, 177, n.3.

\(^{141}\) Ibid., 175, n.3.

\(^{142}\) Felman makes much of mimetic identification without addressing in equal measure the fact that Leys claims a theoretical oscillation with the ‘anti-mimetic.’

\(^{143}\) Felman, *Juridical Unconscious*, 181, n.3.
‘language about language.’ But in a manner that strangely mirrors Leys, Felman suggests that her opponent would confuse and obscure the sources of violence.

Like Leys, Felman makes a swift move from theoretical debate to a presumed disastrous real world consequence: “On this [mimetic] view, the disastrously traumatic events of September 11, 2001, in America…would derive from, and would be defined by, the Americans’ mimetic identification with the aggressors—with the terrorists.”144 It is tempting to argue that the events of September 11, 2001 might trigger thoughts of the U.S. Shock and Awe campaign, among other aggressive and preemptive acts of violence for which a War on Terror provided justification. It is an unacknowledged political stance—one that aligns too easily for comfort with the nationalist and militaristic legacies of that moment—to declare that one can narrate the story of that day with moral clarity, or isolate it in memory from the world politics that set its stage or the events that followed. It seems, that is, quite reasonable to suggest that some form of violent imitation on the part of the U.S. has come to define the meaning of ‘September 11th’ as a cultural phenomenon.145

Felman’s theoretical objections to Leys would actually seem to favor the idea that trauma spreads in ways that are difficult to track with precision. Leys’ dismissal of intergenerational trauma, Felman asserts, “denies the consequences by which trauma refuses to be pigeonholed and fundamentally subverts our frames of reference.”146 Leys is, in this description, out to “suppress, police, deny, and censor” trauma and its effects.147

144 Ibid., 178-9, n.3.
145 This is not to say that no moral judgments can be made, only that depicting September 11, 2001 in isolation from preceding neocolonialism and the ensuing War on Terror highlights one set of violent acts and obscures others.
146 Felman, *Juridical Unconscious*, 181, n.3.
147 Ibid.
It is Leys who cannot distinguish aggressors (terrorists) from victims, and who reads Freud incorrectly. In contrast to Leys’ reduction of trauma studies to ideology (which Leys associated with Caruth) and academic infighting, Felman presents herself and Caruth as truly concerned with how to witness to the suffering of the Other.148

In declaring Caruth to be “a true thinker of the field,” Felman presents Caruth’s relationship to trauma as simultaneously authentic and analytical. That is, Caruth is an expert on trauma because of the breadth and creativity of her study, not her personal experience with traumatic phenomena. Being a true thinker combines a critical distance with something like subjective sincerity. An ideal of sincerity might, as in Felman’s case, be used to combat an over-intellectualizing that subjects already endangered history to further erasure. It might also, as in Forter’s case, be used to critique writing on trauma that bypasses actual traumatic suffering for sublime effects. But positing sincerity and authenticity as the marks of a trustworthy scholar150 may be yet another way of simulating risk from a position of safety.

It may be that this ideal of the scholar who is authentically invested, but whose judgment is not overly clouded by unbounded compassion, is a setup for failure. Our attempts to convincingly cast ourselves or others in this role miss Caruth’s point that theory can never quite fulfill its promises. To continue to make promises one does not fulfill is, in Felman’s reading of Molière’s Don Juan, another kind of unwillingness to admit the inevitability of death. By repeatedly breaking engagements in order to fall (what to make of this kind of falling?) in love again and again, Don Juan attempts

148 Ibid., 175, n.3.
149 Ibid., 173, n.3.
150 It is worth emphasizing that Caruth does not make such claims about herself, and Felman makes them only on Caruth’s behalf.
immortality through anaphasis.\textsuperscript{151} This denial makes him an object of amazement and hostility, and above all moral judgment.

But is Don Juan truly in denial about his mortality? Is he unwilling to die, or unwilling (or unable) to die in the ways his social context would prescribe, as others would have him die? In reality, Don Juan’s actions hasten his death rather than prevent it. The scandal is not that he lives forever, but that he lives transgressively in a way that undermines the authority of convention,\textsuperscript{152} and the consequence is death. This does not make him moral, or a hero. But Felman reads \textit{Don Juan} as a play portraying “the very cruelty of the performative: the cruelty of the speech act—the quintessential act of the speaking body—inasmuch as it comprises an ineluctable necessity of rupture or break.”\textsuperscript{153} Don Juan is not immune to this cruelty, even if he is its agent for others.\textsuperscript{154} Nor is he fully responsible for how others suffer: “Don Juan himself is thus only the symptom of a perversity inherent in the promise,”\textsuperscript{155} of “the self-subverting power of the performative.”\textsuperscript{156} Even in the case of a character who ought to know better, who promises recklessly with questionable intent, language works in ways that make disappointment inevitable. We might speculate in turn that it does little good to accuse theory that fails at the impossible of being insincere. Pointing with glee or outrage to one another’s failures could be a version of resisting de Man’s fall to theory.

By observing the ways in which embodiment resists philosophy, Caruth could be seen as predicting the misunderstandings and critiques that attach to her work. In a sense,

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 50.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 44.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 46.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 49.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 51.
she foresees her own theory’s failure, and that its failure may open up appreciation for historical loss and trauma. Those who problematize her theory in the name of more narrowly interrogating historical events and their causes could be seen as responding unwittingly to her call. The title of this section alludes to a novel by Jeanette Winterson and its repeated statement, almost an incantation, that “There’s no such thing as autobiography, there’s only art and lies.” A similar distinction seems necessary in theory that pursues a version of truth or representation that acknowledges it cannot tell the realities it means to convey.

Just as we saw in Herman’s work, our attempts to be decisively on the side of the victim, and the correct side of history, lead to oversimplification. To Herman’s demand for the truth and Caruth’s insistence that we cannot tell trauma, the question is now: Can we give one another permission to fictionalize while refusing to lie? Can we accept that living requires a certain amount of fictional coherence that cannot be cleanly replaced with the ‘real story’?

**Measuring the Void**

[D]eterminacy, as materially enacted in the very constitution of a phenomenon, always entails constitutive exclusions (that which must remain indeterminate). Now, it’s one thing for matter to materialize differently according to different measurement practices, but is there some way in which the specificity of measurement practices matters if we’re measuring the void, when the void is presumably nothing?

What does it mean to say that one does not experience trauma as it happens? What does it mean to say that history is the history of “what has not been fully understood,” or “what

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has not yet been fully grasped”?

Does the original experience lie in wait, ready for the grasping if only we could bear adequate witness? Is the goal of witness to take measure of the ‘nothing’ that we find where that original experience ought to have been? Is it the witness’ duty to re-materialize trauma, to make it matter by presenting evidence of its reality? Theory’s conflicted relationship to mortality (its aiming beyond an embodiment that is finally inescapable) implicates both readers and writers, emphasizing textual effects over the structure of arguments. As has been repeated many times in this chapter, the question is not only about how well a text reflects reality, but what it does. The accusation that one conflates perpetrators and victims, and that this is irresponsible if not diabolical, points to a real danger that I nonetheless wish to complicate.

As is by now well known, Paul de Man wrote in 1941 and 1942 for Le Soir, a Belgian journal that collaborated with Nazi Germany beginning in 1940. In an essay entitled “Paul de Man’s Silence,” Felman attempts to slow readers’ moral judgments of de Man’s acts and the fact that they went unknown for the entirety of his academic career in the United States. While a dichotomy between victims and perpetrators is common in literature about the Holocaust, Felman here emphasizes the dangers of othering the ‘bad guys’ of history for ethical self-satisfaction. She insists, “To talk about the Holocaust from a position of self-righteousness and rightness is to deny the very essence of the Holocaust, which was to render this position unavailable.” She enlists Primo Levi’s cautions to those who were not faced with “what it meant to act in a state of coercion” to reserve judgment.

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159 Caruth, *UE*, 72.
161 Felman, “Paul de Man’s Silence,” 707.
162 Ibid., 707.
At the same time, Felman reads de Man’s work as indirectly testifying to the past that he never spoke about, as conveying

…his inside knowledge of the compellingly seductive and radically delusional quality of the event, and in his later vision of the entanglement and the complicity, of the bankruptcy of all conventional historical divisions and the blurring of all boundaries.\(^{163}\)

By her account, de Man was not unaware or unapologetic with regard to his past actions. Rather, he knew too well that “no excuse, and no confession, can undo the violence of his initial wartime writing and of his journalistic speech act.”\(^{164}\) Faced with the reality that his collaboration could not be taken back in any meaningful sense, de Man’s silence enacted a break with his former self that was something like suicide.\(^{165}\) Realizing that his past speech was caught up in political machinery that overtook his individual judgment, de Man experienced an extreme form of the performative’s violence and coercion.\(^{166}\) De Man cannot answer for his past, but can open up through his work a space in which history has “the power to address us in its very silence.”\(^{167}\)

Felman draws attention to the fact that perpetration is often as structural as it is personal. Yet she ennobles de Man’s silence in a way that undoes any sense of his agency, the historical fact that he had and made choices. To suggest that ethical action was impossible, and to equate this impossibility with the impossible choices faced by those imprisoned in concentration camps, elides the vast differences in the kind and degree of coercion faced by de Man and Levi. Insofar as Felman extends these reflections to represent a more generalized precarity in ethics, she negates the very strategies of

\(^{163}\) Ibid., 719.  
\(^{164}\) Ibid., 732.  
\(^{165}\) Ibid., 717.  
\(^{166}\) Ibid., 721.  
\(^{167}\) Ibid., 743.
thought (or theory) needed to identify what choices do exist for thinking and acting in
difficult situations, against suppressive and violent ideologies.

Felman also displaces human violence onto the violence of the performative in a
way that might lend some credibility to Leys’ fears about an inability to identify and
name perpetration. At the same time, her writings on de Man contain an apt warning
about the ways that actors with relative social privilege can become caught up in evil far
beyond anything to which they would consciously consent, or could even imagine. This
does not negate the fact that people sadistically and deliberately harm others, but those
who do not can still be violent. Perpetration is not always a straightforward act, and exists
on a spectrum that includes passive complicity, reluctant assent, and a perplexed absence
of resistance. Violence’s initiating agency cannot be safely located in an external other,
which regardless of what one might think about Paul de Man, has important implications
for examining how violence happens.

Declaring history to be a history of trauma captures the feeling that trauma is
unstoppable. The structural lens that Felman helpfully, if selectively, applies is important
because it signals the need for collective and cooperative efforts. She suggests that one is
unlikely to resist even terrible evil without social support. Indeed, going against violence
that is imbued in cultural norms and expectations requires more imagination than any one
person can be asked to supply. This raises compelling questions about communication in
academic and artistic forms. What does it mean to educate in ways that get beyond
coercive ideological indoctrination? Caruth is invested in theory and literature as sites of
ethical potential and exploration, and this may be an important cue to attend to how one
can aim to persuade while granting others interpretive freedom. Such an orientation
might surpass debates about the merits and faults of particular theorists, aiming instead to engage in open and responsive ethical projects.

The danger that I detect in reading Felman on de Man, against her own grain, is not that we will excuse too many people as individuals. Rather, we might be easily inclined to excuse ourselves, those with whom we are intimate, those to whom we can relate, and those whose image is socially coded as non-threatening and worthy of excusing. Societal narratives of what constitutes violence are selective, and often false in ways that resemble the modern lie. Methods of accusation are themselves often a form of monstrous violence that materializes as mass incarceration, disenfranchisement from employment and political life, and preemptive military and police aggression. It is no accident that all of these patterns are heavily correlated with race, as black and brown people in the U.S. are readily conceived of as perpetrating violence, and rarely officially recognized as victims. Even if we are unable to fully articulate particular events, we can describe with precision many of the structures that enable traumatic violence.

This is a new way of reading Caruth’s statement that “history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas.” While Caruth rightly avoids a strict dichotomy between victim and perpetrator, her extension of Kantian philosophy through de Man and the ensuing alignment of vulnerability with gravity have unintended consequences. It seems as if trauma has no cause. Or, if it does, the cause is magnetic, an ineluctable slide toward disaster. Embodiment itself is culprit, a universal subjection to gravity and the original fall into mortality.

Each particular instance of violence, suffering, or death serves in Caruth’s work to exemplify trauma’s operations in history. But whose bodies serve this function, and why?

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The vulnerability that causes Freud to flee between writings of *Moses and Monotheism* is, as Caruth relates, the direct result of anti-Semitism, imperialism, and war. The murdered child whose mother and friends Caruth interviews in *Literature in the Ashes of History* is a Black child whose community disproportionately experiences gun violence. When Caruth omits any mention of the child’s race, or the fact that his mother’s organization exists for Black mothers of shooting victims, she declines to recognize the extent to which bodies’ disparate treatment shapes their vulnerabilities.

A theory of trauma must reckon with how bodies become unevenly exposed to harm and death. Biopolitical arrangements are repeatedly disowned in ways that make historically created conditions seem natural and inevitable. Dwelling on a universal, fallen condition of mortality can obscure what history and trauma are doing in a particular moment. It can shrug off ongoing responsibility for how we performatively construct social realities—including racial, imperial, and gendered ones—in ordinary ways of living that might be difficult to identify as violent from positions of privilege. A singular account of falling that refers to ‘the body’ in an undifferentiated way can easily cover over these layers of ongoing constitutive action.

Caruth’s stated intention to allow trauma and history to speak through theory’s imperfections leaves room to critique her thought without denying the valid reasons for its broad resonance. Humans are vulnerable in their bodies to history and trauma, and to the traumatic shapes of history in the present. This is a preliminary observation for examining the socially constructed ways that bodies are turned against themselves. Physical differences are key instruments for the construction of categories that protect and empower certain bodies and imperil others.
For Caruth, embodiment itself is connected to falling. To the extent that an originary Fall is named or implied, it is a universal condition belonging to mortal human life. There is the hint, however, that modernity and especially the twentieth century heightened the meaning and peril associated with this vulnerability. This is at least tacit admission that falling happens in ways that can and should be distinguished. This model of trauma’s relationship to falling easily slides toward moral designations, for if death in the Fall is punishment for sin, lives exposed to harm easily become associated with both sin and death. Yet the theorist’s ‘fall,’ as both embodied and complicit (in Sanyal’s multiple sense of being involved, complex, and morally implicated), may still be helpful to consider.

The following chapter looks at Giorgio Agamben’s nuda vita, or bare life, as a situation in which the overly exposed body is the conduit for theorizing a broader social condition. Nuda vita is literally naked life, which Agamben directly associates with original sin. It is the condition that he claims was produced in Nazi run concentration camps, a deprivation of the social and political forms of life that make humanity legible as such.

Outside of discourses on ‘trauma,’ then, is a continuation of the set of associations I have been tracking between sin and suffering—between moral, psychic, and bodily undoing. What persists is the framework of the Fall as a universal human danger that nonetheless exerts dissimilar force. That its force so frequently trails the very human forces of political, social, and economic power is what this dissertation means to name and analyze.
Chapter 4

Trauma, Bare Life, and Original Sin

*Humans...never live merely animate lives. Rather, we live our lives according to the regulatory representations of that which constitutes symbolic life and of that which constitutes its Lack, its mode of symbolic death.*

--Sylvia Wynter, “Beyond the Word of Man”

In the quite different versions in which it appears in both Judith Herman and Cathy Caruth’s work, the Fall is a form of dispossession. In Herman, the trauma victim is deprived of meaning and reason, which in turn prohibits her from expressing in language the trauma she experiences. She loses her sense of self and of belonging to a larger human community. This dispossession is a circumstantial one that can be overcome by a process of personal striving; the therapist’s role is to guide and accompany the victim in this movement toward subjective cohesion and wholeness. Herman argues, moreover, that communities and institutions also tend to disown trauma and traumatized persons, such that dispossession is not merely internal but social and political.

Caruth’s fall belongs to all of ‘us’ living in an age of immeasurable violence and catastrophe. ‘We’ are dispossessed by trauma and by history, which are essentially the same force (history being the history of trauma). The inability of the theorist to render a theory that conveys historical losses with specificity reflects the inability of philosophy to overcome mortality, and both are evidence that theory’s dependence on language is a disposposing limitation. Caruth claims, intriguingly and problematically in my view, that
the fallenness of history and language are one. This joins mortality to history, but in an undifferentiated way that makes the circumstances of mortality—or short of that, vulnerability—difficult to address. At the same time, Caruth wants to claim that evidence of the bodily vulnerability of the theorist is detectable in the inability of her language to fix meaning. Theory discloses the gaps in language that make trauma impossible to recall or possess, and this ought to arouse longing and appreciation for what has been overwritten in historical narrative. This admission of loss ought, in Caruth’s ethical frame, to attune us to the absence that marks what we do not know.

What would it mean to achieve self-possession in a way that undoes whatever fall has occurred? For Herman, this is how one becomes fully human again: healing from trauma recovers a lost coherence and wholeness. One fixes language and meaning, and this narrative stabilization helps to reestablish a sense of safety. In contrast, Caruth sees the desire for such self-possession as an attempt to deny human limitations; it is fundamentally impossible. I want to suggest not that we can decide between these two options, but that a different line of questioning is called for. Herman sees the trauma victim as excluded from universal humanity, and aims for her restoration. Caruth sees humanity as universally wounded by history, but also universally called to recognize where its losses have left gaping holes in narrative and logic. While Herman would fill holes in narration with precise accounts of trauma’s originating incidents, Caruth would hold them open so that the inarticulate (cries, wounds, buried secrets) have a chance to emerge.¹ That both resonate with a theological version of the Fall in which trauma sets in

¹ I do not know whether or not this inaccessibility is meant to indicate indeterminacy. It is unclear, for instance, the extent to which Caruth sees the Shoah as some kind of origin for the relationship between trauma and history she identifies, or how precisely the present ‘catastrophic age’ came about—its degree of continuity with past events. She seems at many points to follow
motion redemptive ethical imperatives is something I have worked to demonstrate in preceding chapters. Here I will go beyond the term ‘trauma,’ asking what it means that the Fall appears in at least one other site of extreme suffering.

Even if it is universal, dispossession is not uniform. I detour into Agamben’s work on the biopolitical concept of bare life because he demonstrates how the violent abandonment of certain lives structures social and political ‘order.’ While Herman and Caruth put hope in the possibility of human solidarity—they believe that attending to trauma victims or awakening to the cries of history might counteract if not undo fallenness—Agamben suggests that human community is an intrinsically exclusive affair.² The notion of an ordered collective depends for its existence on those who are excluded in their inclusion or included by their exclusion, the homo sacer whose ‘ban’ from recognition and exposure to death makes a sense of community possible.³

_Nuda vita_, Agamben’s term for what is translated into English as bare life, marks this exposure as nakedness. In a turn that resonates strongly with the structure of trauma theories, Agamben’s aesthetic writing on nudity claims that it ineluctably references original sin and the Fall. As in Herman and Caruth, people structurally put in harm’s way are also structurally made to represent all of humanity’s sin. At first, it seems that

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² Shoshana Felman’s notion of a ‘sharp break’ in history. However, Caruth does not focus exclusively on events that follow directly from the Shoah and its traumas. Stories about parents who have lost children to sickness [Cathy Caruth, _Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History_ (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, 2016), 94-115] or to gun violence [Cathy Caruth, _Literature in the Ashes of History_ (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 3-17] indicate a broader understanding.

³ This idea has certain resonances with the figure of the scapegoat in René Girard, _The Scapegoat_, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

² These arguments are made most clearly and forcefully in Giorgio Agamben, _Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life_, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
Agamben is more explicit and more critical of this tendency. His claim that ‘we’ are all becoming bare life has indeed been heard as a call to solidarity.\textsuperscript{4}

Yet bare life has itself come under critique for suggesting a false human universal. According to Alexander Weheliye, Agamben repeats rather than corrects the conflation of European history with history, and Western philosophical Man with the human. In his reading of Agamben’s homo sacer trilogy,\textsuperscript{5} Weheliye interprets bare life as “a biological sphere above and beyond the reach of racial hierarchies.”\textsuperscript{6} He objects especially to Agamben’s deployment of the figure of the Muselmann and his ostensible “transcendence of race,”\textsuperscript{7} arguing that the Muselmann only exists as an intensely racialized being.

Part of Weheliye’s objection to Agamben’s theory is that it repeats the abandonment of particular sites of neglected humanity. Biopolitics and bare life, for their founders as well as their interpreters, become shortcuts to ‘knowing’ how human lives suffer, endure, experience, and expire in the worlds those concepts describe. With

\textsuperscript{4} Within the realm of writings on trauma, Jenny Edkins has written of bare life as a concept that enables recognition that “We are all bare life, biopolitically ‘missing.’” Edkins combines a Lacanian account of subjectivity with the more circumstantial (even as it becomes pervasive) notion of bare life as remaining alive physically while one is “symbolically and politically dead.” Edkins sees privileged opportunity for resistance at the sites of traumatic events because “events we call traumatic are a point at which the structures of sovereign authority are particularly vulnerable to challenge” [Jenny Edkins, “Time, Personhood, Politics,” in The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism, ed. Gert Buelens, Sam Durant, and Robert Eaglestone (London, New York: Routledge, 2014), 130-2]. Edkins is putting forth a smooth alignment between biopolitical arrangements and the phallic economy, a premise that I would question. I do, however, find something suggestive in her claim that biopower has gaps and cracks through which meaningful resistance can happen.


\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 56.
genuine intent to undermine violent structures, norms, and ideals, biopolitical theories inadvertently reproduce hierarchies of humanity by imagining that they transcend identity and locality. Furthermore, Weheliye argues that Agamben, through the concept of bare life, posits “an indivisible biological substance anterior to racialization.” This neglects the operation of what Weheliye terms “racializing assemblages”: the disciplinary sorting of human beings “into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans.”

I will argue that, while Agamben’s concept of bare life may be more complex and multi-dimensional than Weheliye allows, it does in fact obscure the decisive operation of racialization in biopolitical distributions of (exposure to) death. Like Weheliye, I find that philosopher Sylvia Wynter offers important theoretical interventions for a critique of Agamben. I argue, however, that Weheliye has overlooked the extent to which Wynter frames racism as a theologically structured phenomenon based on original sin. According to Wynter, original sin helped to establish a hybridly religious and secular notion of ontological lack that made way for European and American racial ideologies. As eugenic scientific paradigms emerged, Indigenous and African peoples (and ‘mad’ Europeans) took on ontological fallenness—a state that had in turn become evolutionary dysselection, a “Lack of normal human nature” or biologized ontological immaturity.

Reading original sin as having a decisive role in the historical trajectory of race recasts the problem of the Fall’s relation to trauma. It is not that those who experience trauma are incidentally associated with sin. Wynter urges that fallenness itself is not an innocent designation, that it has in fact been forged through and as race. It becomes

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8 Ibid., 4.
9 I use the word secular here reflecting Wynter’s use of the term but would in my own voice more cautiously say ‘non-theological.’
evident that original sin as it now operates feeds ideologies that cause and rationalize traumatic violence. As seen in the previous chapters, the victims of violence are often cast through versions of the Fall as morally alienated or already fallen in a way that fails to register harm. These were the curious turns taken in theories of trauma that aim for solidarity with history and society’s victims, and bare life takes a similar trajectory when it aligns a feminized nudity with original sin. Yet Wynter would hold that such a turn is entirely predictable, built into a Euro-North American pattern of reading, marking, and endangering bodies. What becomes clear reading Agamben’s Fall with an eye to race and gender is that patterns of social violence come about because of sadism and design rather than by accident. This matrix of violent habit and desire infiltrates theories of trauma and bare life, against their authors’ own intentions, in their aesthetics and visions for ethics.

**Undoing the Human**

*For blood is the symbol of bare life [das blosse Leben]...the dissolution of legal violence goes back to the guilt of bare, natural life that delivers the person living it, all innocence and misfortune, up to expiation, which then ‘expiates’ his or her guilt—and also, no doubt, redeems the guilty party, though not from any guilt: from law.*

Giorgio Agamben’s concept of bare life derives in large part from Walter Benjamin’s use of the term, one that cannot be defined in a precise or straightforward way. Rather, it zig-zags across political, religious, and moral categories. Nor is

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12 I focus here on Benjamin’s use of the term in “On the Critique of Violence,” because that is Agamben’s primary point of reference. It is worth noting that, as in Agamben, Benjamin talks about *bloße Leben* in both socio-political and aesthetic contexts. While I cannot here pursue a comparison of how the term travels in each author’s work, this would be well worth examining. See Benjamin, “Fate and Character,” trans. Edmund Jephcotte, ed. Michael W. Jennings, in
Agamben’s adoption of these words and translation of them as *nuda vita* identical to their meaning in Benjamin’s text. Because the resonance is clearly intentional, however, I will make a few brief points about *bloße Leben* as it appears in the 1921 essay, “On the Critique of Violence.”

Benjamin argues that parliamentary democracies elide and forget the violence that establishes their law. They become ineffective when “…they have failed to retain an awareness of the revolutionary forces to which they owe their existence.” They regard the social contract as eliminating or obviating violence, failing to realize that a contract must imply at least hypothetical violence in order to function. Law-upholding force is not primarily a matter of punishment, but of strengthening the law by maintaining its monopoly over violence. Police tend, perhaps counterintuitively, to undermine legal structures because their actions do not observe a distinction between law-establishing and law-upholding violence; their domain is that of state impotence rather than state power. The empirical and amorphous aims of ‘security’ justify intervention “where no clear legal situation exists,” and this extra-legal form of violence undermines democratic rule of law.

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14 Both Benjamin and Agamben are deploying versions of ‘sovereignty’ as defined in Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985). The sovereign is “he who decides on the exception,” which places an element of what Martin Kavka calls “anarchy and irrationality” at the heart of the modern state [Martin Kavka, “What Do the Dead Deserve? Toward a Critique of Jewish ‘Political Theology,’” in *Judaism, Liberalism, and Political Theology*, eds. Randi Rashkover and Martin Kavka (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 111]. The tangled and complicit legacies of theoretical genealogies are again apparent, as Schmitt joined the Nazi party in May of 1933.


16 Ibid., 5, 10-1.

17 Ibid., 12-3.
Democracy, Benjamin suggests, misguidedly refuses to question the assumption that justice can arise through law. Presuming that there are generalizable just ends toward which all can be directed, legal theory sets itself the impossible task of determining by reason “the legitimacy of means and the justice of ends.” This assumption neglects, among other things, violence as it occurs in myth— an outbreak or lashing out that constitutes a “manifestation” rather than a means to an end. Taking a mythic view of violence, one understands the establishment of the law as something beyond human intention, something akin to fate. In contrast, Benjamin describes justice as almost inevitably theological, a realm of “divine end-establishment” that contrasts with “mythic law-establishment.” While the divine follows the logic of justice, mythic law abides by the logic of power.

The role of power, then, is fundamentally at stake in Benjamin’s critique. The fantasy that law and violence channel their ends toward justice is belied by the fact that “the mythic manifestation of direct violence reveals itself as deeply identical to all legal violence.” Mythic violence, in all its reactive arbitrariness, establishes law. Divine violence, aimed at justice, ‘destroys’ the law. Its violence, while broader and more likely a form of “boundless destruction,” serves expiatory ends. It does not establish a new law, but produces “moments of bloodless, smiting, atoning consummation.” While the grandness of Benjamin’s language here makes it difficult to identify with precision what divine law’s operation might look like, it is clear that he aims to reveal “something rotten

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18 Ibid., 20-1.
19 Ibid., 21-2.
20 Ibid., 23.
21 Ibid., 24.
22 Ibid., 24.
in the law”\textsuperscript{23} that produces unnecessary, unjust violence. This is, at least in part, an account of how arbitrary power embedded in law covers its tracks and presents itself as proceeding naturally from justice.

Returning to the lines from Benjamin with which this section opened, bloße Leben is subject to the law and mythic violence in a way that “the soul of the person living” is not. Bare life, symbolized by blood, carries an innate ‘guilt’ before the law, which demands sacrifices but is never satiated.\textsuperscript{24} Divine violence, as “pure violence over all life for the sake of the living person,” is fundamentally different in that it can effect redemption that transcends law itself.\textsuperscript{25} While bloße can mean naked, and this would smoothly align with Agamben’s nuda, Carlo Salzani points out that it can also be translated as ‘no better than,’ ‘nothing but,’ or ‘mere.’\textsuperscript{26} This is the sense in which Leland de la Durantaye interprets Benjamin’s use of the word.\textsuperscript{27} Mere, bloody life (subject to the law) contrasted with a living soul (which law can never fully destroy) might suggest a familiar division between flesh and spirit, body and soul. When Benjamin argues that “…man is not at all identical to the bare life of man,”\textsuperscript{28} it is tempting to read this as a claim that real, important, and sacred life exists on a plane other than the physical.

I confess here that I am unsure what guarantees the non-arbitrariness of Benjamin’s account of divine justice. Yet there is a political and relational element to the essay as a whole that necessarily implicates bodies and their actions in life beyond bare life. Killing cannot be justified by projecting that it will bring about justice, even in a

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 24-5.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 24.
\textsuperscript{26} Salzani, 3.
\textsuperscript{28} Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” 26.
revolutionary killing of one’s oppressor.\textsuperscript{29} This logic would render “a particular existence” less important or worthy of protection than “existence as such,” a reasoning process that Benjamin regards as “wrong, obviously; it is even dishonorable.”\textsuperscript{30} At the same time, it locates an ambiguity in proclaiming life sacred, and the limitation of a commandment not to kill. Insofar as a commandment is “a guideline for action aimed at the person or community acting,” it must be constantly interpreted, and those who wrestle with it will have to face the consequences of their decisions. More plainly, God’s commandment does not prevent killing. It does not even equip one with a secure way of judging actions, because it will always be “inapplicable, incommensurable, in the presence of the done deed.”\textsuperscript{31} This is why, for Benjamin, justice wipes away the law itself.

Crucially for what will follow, Benjamin urges that there is an “obligation to stop trying to find the reason for the commandment in what the murder does to the victim rather than in what it does to God and to the murderer.”\textsuperscript{32} There will be victims who could, in a calculus for supporting life, be said to deserve death. Yet for Benjamin, this rush to enact one’s vision of justice is another form of “reprehensible” law-establishing or law-upholding violence.\textsuperscript{33} To designate bare life as bearing guilt is mythical thinking. The messianic matter at hand is one of acceding to the divine realm of justice.

Bare life in Agamben names a sociopolitical position and biopolitical situation. The concept refers to the operations of power that expose human lives to harm. Bare life in Agamben’s \textit{Homo Sacer} is a “zone of indistinction” between a politically recognized

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., 25-6.
\item Ibid., 26.
\item Ibid., 25.
\item Ibid., 26.
\item Ibid., 26-8.
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form of life (bios) and the ‘natural’ or biological “simple fact of living” (zoē). These two types of life here “constitute each other in including and excluding each other.” People with the status of bare life are legally and morally unprotected; their killing “is classifiable neither as sacrifice nor as homicide, neither as the execution of a condemnation to death nor as sacrilege.” Bare life is created in ways that exploit human embodiment, but is not reducible to an innate feature of existence.

As bare life blurs distinctions between bios and zoē, it demonstrates that threats to each are intertwined. The precarity of political viability threatens the biological, and biological threats emerge within political matrices that make it impossible to regard ‘natural’ life in isolation. Exemplary figures of bare life are thus found at political margins, in eugenic discourses on euthanasia and unwillingness to summon human rights to protect refugees. For Agamben, bare life is figured most pointedly and tellingly by the victims of the Holocaust: European Jews, the Versuchspersonen who were subjects (objects) of Nazi medical experiments, and most famously for Agamben’s readers the

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34 It should be noted that Agamben does not use the term translated as bare life (nuda vita) consistently, and does at times use it to indicate the realm of zoē or ‘purely’ biological or creaturely life, something thought to be innate and non-political (see, for instance, Homo Sacer, 127). The consequences of certain of these ambiguities and conflations will be a major focus of the following section in this chapter. Nonetheless, in the context of the Homo Sacer volume, it is clear that bare life as it aligns with the sovereign ban is meant to indicate the zone in which biological and political life cannot be distinguished or extracted from one another.

One precursor to Agamben’s use of these terms is Hannah Arendt’s statement that “specifically human life” is “bios as distinguished from mere zoē.” Bios refers in Arendt to a specifically human life with events that can be given narrative form, made into “a biography.” Zoe is natural, biological life—a necessary condition for the ‘praxis’ which is bios but not distinctly human. Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958, 1998), 97.

35 Agamben, Homo Sacer, 1, 90.
36 Ibid., 82.
37 Ibid., 126-43.
38 Ibid., 179.
39 Ibid., 154.
Like trauma then, bare life signifies spaces of oppression, violence, and deprivation. “What is captured in the sovereign ban is a human victim who may be killed but not sacrificed: *homo sacer.*” Those made to exist as bare life are *essentially* victims, regarded as sacred because of their proximity to death.

In *The Use of Bodies,* Agamben explores how ‘nutritive life,’ something like biological need and existence, becomes instrumental for biopower. Through a reading of Aristotle’s *De Anima,* he argues that what allows nutritive life to function as foundation and motor of the bio-political machine [which Agamben has said ‘articulates and politicizes life’] is above all its separability from other spheres of life (while the others cannot be separated from it). But what constitutes its privilege is also what authorizes its exclusion from the city and from everything that defines the human as such.

Here the reader witnesses biological life blurring with life as politically permitted and defined. All forms of life require a baseline of subsistence, but this baseline does not guarantee political viability. Reading on, however, Agamben finds that Aristotle actually renders “a curious terminological proximity between the nutritive (or vegetative) soul and the intellectual.” There is also “a striking correspondence between the lowest part of the

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40 The Musselman is a figure that Agamben reads from Primo Levi’s *The Drowned and the Saved* where he explains: “they are overcome before they can begin to adapt themselves…Their life is short but their number is endless; they are the *Müsselmanner,* the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer” [Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Summit Books, 1988), 103]. Agamben takes the Musselman as the paradigmatic figure for concentration camp life, the life to which he believes ‘we’ are all sliding. See Agamben, *Remnants.* Literally meaning ‘Muslim,’ the term ‘Musselman’ has presented both historians and theorists with seemingly irresolvable questions about the origin and meaning of the term in the context of German concentration camps. This figure is a key target of Alexander Weheliye’s critiques, discussed below.


43 This is an important point of contrast with Arendt. For Arendt, it is decisively the case that human systems of order make life and death, growth and decay, out of what in nature would have no such meaning. The human life that cycles like nature in the form of *laboring* is doing
human soul and the highest, thought (nous).”44 It is beyond the scope of this work to assess Agamben’s play with Greek translations in the chapter entitled “Life Divided.” The point I wish to make is that in elaborating Aristotle’s writing on the soul, Agamben finds subsistence and thought coming unexpectedly together. Because “generation and the use of food” are reproductive activities, there is something transcendent or ‘divine’ about the nutritive faculty. Nutritive life is not meaningful because of “its exclusion-inclusion in the city,” but because “in letting the heart beat, the lungs respire, and the mind think, it confers unity and sense on every form of life.”45 Agamben’s description of a politically excluded-included life that belongs to a capacious understanding of life or being by virtue of its breath, pulse, and thought might be seen as his inscription of bare life in Aristotelian cosmology.

Agamben proceeds to explore how this extension into a basic biological realm might relate to his prior framework of bare life in relation to sovereignty. As in Homo Sacer, he reminds the reader that bare life is the founding site of political power, and that the state of exception constantly threatens to erupt as ban. Sovereignty is constituted by the ability to decide on the state of exception, and thus its control over bare life is essential. In this context, however, Agamben begins to surround the review of political with qualifying statements: It is “[t]he political power we are familiar with,” created by

something essentially different from working (Arendt, 97-8). The animal laborans is governed by the body’s animality, toiling in order to meet its nutritive needs. Labor makes no lasting impact, “the result of its effort is almost as quickly consumed as the effort is spent” (87). Work, in contrast, is performed by the homo faber whose speech and action can shape its surrounding world (136): “Productivity and creativity, which were to become the highest ideals and even the idols of the modern age in its initial stages, are inherent standards of homo faber, of man as builder and fabricator” (296). While Arendt is not content with the way in which intellect is thoroughly instrumentalized by homo faber, she regards its giving way to homo laborans to be dangerous, even degrading, for thought (320-1, 324).

44 Agamben, Use of Bodies, 205.
45 ibid., 205-6.
power’s own crisis—that “power today has no form of legitimation other than emergency and everywhere and continually refers to it and, at the same time, secretly works to produce it.” Power, at least the sovereign kind, is in danger of losing its grip on political life, and must generate states of emergency that validate such a form of control. Bare life issues from the process of attempting to justify the unjustifiable, which is why the state of exception permeates seemingly mundane reality.

Agamben introduces the notion of a “form-of-life…in which it is never possible to isolate and keep distinct something like bare life.” In contrast to Weheliye’s reading, Agamben asserts that it is a mistake (one that he in turn attributes to Bataille) to take bare life “for a superior principle.” Bare life is neither sovereign nor sacred, and cannot be any sort of rallying point for resistance. In a manner that parallels trauma’s undoing of subjectivity in Judith Herman’s work (trauma as a shattered state that cannot properly be called living), Agamben sees bare life as a condition in which lives are unable to cohere into forms-of-life. The politics to which he wishes to draw attention is “the becoming human of the human being,” the ongoingness of which makes life a form-of-life. In such a politics, a different kind of living is possible.

This ‘becoming human of the human being’ will be very much at stake in what follows, for what does it mean to become human? When is a life human enough to qualify as such, and how is it possible that some could be further along in ‘becoming human’ than others? Does this human have a form, and if so, how is it to be recognized?

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46 Ibid., 208-9.
47 While Agamben does not precisely delineate the causes and forces involved, it is clear that economic arrangements play a large role in this shift.
48 Agamben, Use of Bodies, 207.
49 Ibid., 209.
50 Ibid., 208.
Form-of-life, the mode of existence that Agamben advocates and elevates, is a way of living infused by thought. “By this we do not understand the individual exercise of an organ or psychic faculty but an experience, an experimentum that has as its object the potential character of life and human intelligence.” Thought is not, in other words, a singular thing one does with the brain, but a way of being and acting and perceiving. Most critically here, it directs itself toward “a potential character of life and human intelligence,” something that shared (universal?) humanity has the potential to become. While still referencing Aristotle, Agamben employs existentialist vocabulary with the remark that

Only if act is never separate from potential, only if, in my lived experiences and my acts of understanding..., I always have to do with living and understanding themselves—that is to say, if there is, in this sense, thought—then a form of life can become, in its very facticity and thingliness, form-of-life, in which it is never possible to isolate something like bare life. Thought can transform life caught in its structuring and constraining conditions into a form-of-life.

The notion that superior modes of existence are available to those who can never be reduced to bare life because of their superior way of living reinforces the structure of fallenness that I have been pursuing throughout this dissertation. Taken as a statement about the importance of intention or self-reflexivity, Agamben’s statement could be a fairly benign exhortation to critical thinking or even what is popularly termed mindfulness. I will strive to demonstrate, however, that it is impossible to read potential, intelligence, and the human as unmarked categories. With these terms, Agamben invokes lineages of thought that have historically delimited humanity according to race and

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51 Ibid., 210.
52 He may be drawing from Heidegger, though perhaps more likely Sartre given the influence of Being and Nothingness on Agamben’s essay “Nudity,” cited below.
53 Agamben, Use of Bodies, 211.
gender. Privilege becomes (de-theologized) divine favor, and trauma the evidence of a morally debased state.

*Nude Bodies, Naked Life*

In the aesthetic realm, Agamben explicitly connects bare life to original sin. By the fifth paragraph of an essay entitled “Nudity,” he has arrived at the Genesis story of Adam and Eve, who immediately after eating fruit from the tree of knowledge realized that they were naked.54 It could seem a stretch to connect his discourse on nudity in art to the previously mentioned philosophical and political theoretical uses of the term. Yet the same words, *nuda vita*, appear in this context as in the others. These are, moreover, not entirely separable discourses, even for Agamben. In the essay’s second paragraph, still introducing its topic, Agamben mentions the torturing of naked prisoners at Abu Ghraib by U.S. soldiers, emphasizing that nakedness was part of the torture and that those being tortured were inspected while naked by clothed guards. Political violence and its rituals of dehumanization are thus explicitly present, even when the topic at hand is ostensibly artistic representation.

Writing to a western European academic audience for whom he presumes a Catholic background, Agamben asserts that, “Nudity, in our culture, is inseparable from a theological signature.”55 It seems not to exist, that is, until after Adam and Eve have sinned and become aware that they are naked. Agamben cites Erik Peterson’s comment that before sin there was a lack of clothing, but this was not the same as nudity.

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55 Ibid., 57.
(Nacktheit).\textsuperscript{56} Following a widespread, largely Augustinian, reading of original sin, the original couple is envisioned as having ‘clothing of grace’ prior to sinning. The loss of this clothing creates nudity, which remains with all of humanity and testifies to the need for redemption by Christ. Nudity for Agamben is then called forth by sin, a wedge that drives apart nature and grace. It comes about at the moment of sin, and is “the only content of their knowledge of good and evil.”\textsuperscript{57} Nudity is, moreover, something that cannot be fully perceived or captured; it is visible in “fleeting” glimpses but always covered over quickly.\textsuperscript{58}

It matters that this conversation arises in relation to aesthetics, because the emphasis is not on the one who realizes herself to be naked, but on how one views and contemplates others’ nakedness. The inability to see the Other naked in any full or sustained way leads, in Agamben’s essay, to the intense desire for and pursuit of nudity. He suggests that nudity is ineluctably bound up with sadism, following Sartre’s claim that desire “is above all a strategy directed toward making the ‘flesh’… appear in the body of the Other.”\textsuperscript{59} The body in situation is metaphorically clothed, the actions that keep it from being flesh are \textit{movements} that block incarnation.\textsuperscript{60} The sadist’s desire is doomed; he cannot incarnate the Other or “seize…the empty shell of grace” that keeps her body in situation.\textsuperscript{61} The failure to make the other flesh is also a failure to possess her, evidence

\textsuperscript{57} Agamben, “Nudity,” 81.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 57.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 73.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 74.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 76-7.
that something about the Other “remains obstinately unobtainable” even in her violation or destruction.  

“Nudity” is a theological essay aiming to get ‘beyond’ theology. Agamben is looking at something that he admits is constructed rather than innate, a theological matrix that has become so thoroughly embedded in habits of thought that it can govern human behavior and attitudes without, or even when it conflicts with, conscious belief. He argues that theological ways of thinking permeate perceptions of nudity, inculcating desires that are painful and sadistic, and futile with respect to their underlying needs. This way of perceiving nudity through original sin stands in the way of a better way of perceiving, one that would not seek the other’s undoing as a route to truth or meaning.

The project seems to be one of defusing one’s own desire to see others made bare:

“The aim here is not to tap into an original state prior to the separation but to comprehend and neutralize the apparatus that produced this separation.” This is a redemptive quest, one that aims to bring nature and grace back together. While it is not a return to the original state, it is nonetheless a mending of original sin. It is the loss of a particular faith, one that comes about with the understanding that “in the human body beauty is essentially and infinitely ‘unveilable’; it can always be exhibited as mere appearance.”

One thus stops expecting that if the other would only be naked enough, a secret would be known.

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62 Ibid., 79.
63 Ibid., 66.
64 Ibid., 85. Walter Benjamin makes yet another appearance in this essay. Agamben cites him as claiming that “beauty can exist as essence only where the duality of nudity and clothing no longer exists: in art and the phenomena of naked nature [bloßen Natur]” (85). It is quite evocative that Benjamin’s multiple uses of bloße parallel Agamben’s nuda, but it is again more than I can do in this chapter to fully explore this relationship.
The deactivation of this apparatus retroactively operates, therefore, as much on nature as on grace, as much on nudity as on clothing, liberating them from their theological signature. This simple dwelling of appearance in the absence of secrets is its special trembling—it is the nudity that, like the choirboy’s “white” voice, signifies nothing and, precisely for this reason, manages to penetrate us.\(^6^5\)

Breaking free of the theological brings about a pure state or experience in which the problematic desire dissolves into nothing.

The ‘white’ voice (voce bianca) of choirboys is named earlier in the essay as a symbol of nostalgia for lost innocence, and here returns as an analogy for undeceived perception. This ending on whiteness, its alignment with that which is beyond both grace and nature, rather pointedly demonstrates the racial coding of prelapsarian grace. That which stands simply in its inexplicable beauty, paradoxically disenchanted and sublime, and which can release ‘us’ from relentless pursuit of secrets in nudity, is a ‘white’ sound that pierces through Agamben’s scrambling for meaning and morality.\(^6^6\)

Given bare life’s structural similarities to theories of a founding trauma—the stripping of subjective or human identity, an undoing or blocking of relationality—it is striking to find yet another version of the Fall structuring a concept used to describe extreme conditions of oppression and suffering. What is curious about Agamben’s attempt to deconstruct and then leave behind a theologically inflected apparatus in his discussion of nudity is the evident pleasure he takes in dwelling with this stickness. As much as he may want to leave behind Augustine, “Nudity” takes a distinctly Augustinian approach to desire. Desire is not easily negated; it pesters and pursues, binding the mortal subject with its compulsions even though “nudity can never satiate the gaze to which it is

\(^{65}\) Ibid., 90.
\(^{66}\) Just how far ‘white’ can be read in racial terms here is ambiguous. Voce Bianca would refer to a treble, clear, or clean voice (Mark Jordan deserves credit for this insight). At the same time, the alignment of purity and innocence with ‘white’ still evokes the racial ideologies that are more broadly in play.
offered.” I wonder, in the end, whether Agamben would truly prefer to neutralize the desire that seems to drive not only dynamics of spectating and relating, but also his own urge to theorize.

But what does this mean for bare life? Agamben suggests that the promise of nudity to strip down to the truth or to tell us a secret compels desire for it. Yet this is never what nudity delivers, and it is incapable of doing so. If we accept, as I think Agamben also does, that there is a connection between the naked life (*nuda vita*) translated in *Homo Sacer* as bare life and his comments on nudity, perhaps Agamben is attempting from yet another angle to divest from the violence of biopolitics. He could be indirectly, even allegorically, demonstrating the importance of recognizing a desire to undo the other, and trying to disassemble that desire among his audience. If nudity is only privation and never a state that one can be in, this raises the possibility that bare life too is event rather than status. Perhaps bare life, too, never exists in itself, but transpires in processes of baring (of deprivation, denial, and violation).

While I offer here a favorable and plausible reading of Agamben’s essay, the text remains obsessed with and troubled by a nude femininity that refuses to be degraded. Whether by purposeful self-exposure (in showing the author’s own implication in the material) or unconscious slippage, “Nudity” fixates on how naked women frustrate a straight male gaze by doing nudity wrong. In what follows I will raise a series of race-related critiques of Agamben’s theory of bare life. In the aesthetic discussion of nudity, however, it is gender and sexuality that surface most blatantly. “Striptease,” Agamben argues, is “the paradigm for our relationship with nudity.” Nudity is a striptease that

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67 Ibid., 66.
68 This is the reading of bare life endorsed by Salzani.
proceeds infinitely, never revealing that which it suggests and promises. Agamben narrates, even as he rejects, the ardent desire to see and be satisfied by nudity, an urge to behold the Other stripped of grace.

Desiring Flesh

In “Nudity,” relational longing for the naked Other is intertwined with potently sadistic desire. Sartre’s naked body made graceful by the clothing of its acts offers up the idea of ‘flesh’ as a challenge: The flesh must be present underneath the veil of grace, and this knowledge (or inevitable presumption) drives the sadist to attempt, “in every possible way, to make the flesh appear, to force the body of the Other into incongruous positions that reveal its obscenity, that is, its irreparable loss of grace.” Christian notions of grace are here conflated with the grace that Sartre defines as the Other’s body being ‘in situation.’ This indeterminacy makes it even more difficult to trace or assess Agamben’s commitment to overcoming the structures of desire associated with nudity.

Materiality seems at points a tease, giving something that can be acted on in a way that feeds sadistic fantasy but withholds what is most important or essential. Agamben refers to the wax model made by Clemente Susini, a “beautiful feminine nude” that can be disemboweled piece by piece, organ by organ until one arrives at the womb and “a small fetus.” On the one hand, this lends a sinister air to the desire for nudity, demonstrating that the desire to remove grace is the desire to dismantle life itself. It is also meant to demonstrate futility. Whether metaphor or mockery (perhaps he intends a

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70 Ibid., 66.
71 Ibid., 75.
72 Ibid., 64.
73 Ibid., 76-9.
degree of comedy?) Agamben laments that, “…no matter how much we open the wax model and scrutinize it with our gaze, the naked body of the beautiful, disemboweled woman remains obstinately unobtainable.” The sadist, like the one who watches a striptease waiting for nudity, is determined but foolish, and the reader is invited to witness—but also to empathize with—this folly.

There is something intensely disturbing about the juxtaposition of Agamben’s comments on sadism and the ways that he portrays (conscious, living) women in art exhibits or fashion magazines. Femininity carries an evasive and inscrutable threat, and the desirous male gaze is to be pitied for its impotence. Analyzing a pair of photos from *Vogue* in which female models are portrayed in the same arrangement in poses, naked in one instance and clothed in the other, Agamben is struck by the indifference and inexpressiveness of their faces. The face in these photos “is no longer a face” because it has traces of “neither shame nor glory.” Yet what this actually means is that, when the Other fails to evoke for the viewer (at least, Agamben as viewer) either fallenness or redemption, abjection or sublimity, she ceases to be human. The moral gaze and assessment is trained on the one who will not be bared, who even when disemboweled will not offer up secrets. Her role is to provoke moral reflection for the (presumably heterosexual male, or at least masculine) viewer, and her failure to do so produces additional judgment.

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74 Ibid., 79.
75 Ibid., 80.
76 I am in this chapter replicating what I know to be a problematic equation of femininity, female, and woman. I do this to illustrate Agamben’s work and its logic, but would register here my dissatisfaction with these terms as descriptive of what is ‘really’ happening. To begin with, Agamben’s readings of Other bodies demonstrate that their construction as viewed and viewable objects is highly fantasmatic.
Yet moral judgments also attach to the one who is bared. Two uncredited photos that the essay associates with “a genre of sadomasochistic publications” that “has recently spread,” the same woman is shown in different poses. On the left, she is conservatively groomed and smiling in what seems to be a high-necked t-shirt. There is a title in Chinese characters (which Agamben does not translate) that mean approximately ‘Secret Play Chamber.’ In the photo on the right, the same woman’s face is shown without a shirt, with what appear to be two chopsticks, tied at both ends, clamping her lower lip. Disembodied hands grip her hair. Her eyes are squeezed shut and her face looks strained. Agamben provides no direct commentary on either picture but remarks on this ‘genre’ by saying that one first views “the future victim dressed elegantly in her usual context.” Then, “Turning a few pages forward, the reader suddenly sees the same girl undressed, tied up, and forced to assume the most unnatural and painful positions, removing all grace even from the lineaments of her face, which are deformed and contorted by special instruments.” He makes a direct leap into theological language, arguing that “The sadistic apparatus…is here the perfect profane equivalent of sin, which according to theologians, removes the clothes of grace and brusquely liberates in the body the absence of grace that defines ‘naked corporeality.’” This is Agamben’s argument, but framed as an observation. It is theologians who say that naked corporeality is the absence of grace, and there would be no arguing with this claim in theological terms. Sadism—or its instrument (human or inhuman?)-- is the profane equivalent of sin. Simultaneously, however, the body without grace is the body that sadism objectifies.

77 Ibid., 75-6.
The point for Agamben is the destined failure of the sadist’s desire to grasp the other’s ‘incarnation.’ Yet so many other issues arise in this illustration. Why, for instance, does a picture of a person who would widely read as an East Asian woman appear in such an ethnically marked—and yet unremarked—way? What does it mean that the ‘sadist,’ or the fantasized sadistic agency of the scene, is only visible as a pair of hands? Furthermore, what does the theatricality of it all signify for Agamben—the fact that the photos are clearly deliberately posed, and that they are part of a trend in fetish photography that follows a reliable pattern in spite of staging surprise or ‘secrets’?

Following a pattern so tired that one can only refer to it as trope, the feminine side of binary sexual relations is cast as evidence of sin and provocation toward it. If there is something in Agamben’s examples that disrupts this relation, it is not a defense of the subjectivity of the women whose bodies and presentations are under scrutiny. The ultimate form of grace, the way out of the trap set by centuries or even millennia of conceiving nudity as birthed by sin, seems to be the substitution of desire for nudity with knowledge about how nudity works.

One might be able to read Agamben against the grain as calling for the undoing of sexist objectification. Yet it is clear in what he has actually written that the proclaimed emptiness of feminine nudity is meant to rescue the masculine viewer or reader from falling for ‘the nihilism of beauty’ and its wasteful, hazardous temptations. For Agamben, “the theological apparatus” distorts understandings of both nature and grace. The theologically reinforced social apparatus that makes this relation an explicitly gendered and implicitly racialized one is not his concern.

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78 Ibid., 76.
79 Ibid., 88.
80 Ibid., 90.
Agamben’s aesthetic theory tries to explicate and undermine a sadistic desire to see the other reduced to flesh, her humanity undone. He articulates the task as one of de-theologization, which ought to perform a sort of disenchantment with nudity. Letting go of transcendent ideals, giving up on accessing grace through the body, one might also be able to relinquish the expectation that another’s flesh can be possessed. It is probably clear by now that I find the expectations attached to this logic dubious. What I find more troubling, however, is the theoretical performance itself. Its repeated neglect of feminine subjectivity aside, the beautiful but indifferent woman is charged with nihilism and rendered inhuman, the responsive and receptive woman aligned with sin. Far from being undifferentiated, naked life has subjects on whom it is expected to appear, on whom it ought to appear. Its power to disturb and arouse, a power that does not really belong to the subjects through whom it travels, is raced and gendered.

The Racialization of Original Sin

In Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human, Weheliye raises a critique of Agamben’s conception of bare life that resonates strongly with the critiques of trauma theory I have cited and pursued. Weheliye argues that bare life is construed in a universalizing frame that ignores analyses of “race, subjection, and humanity found in black and ethnic studies” in favor of positing “an indivisible biological substance anterior to racialization.” Weheliye is concerned that biopolitical definitions of political violence too readily accept “the

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81 He even drags Walter Benjamin into the muck, referencing his journal entries about “very attractive female friends” who Benjamin decided overvalued appearance in a way that gave them a dysfunctional relationship to speech (87).
82 Ibid., 88.
83 Weheliye, 4.
putatively biological human body,” ignoring the fact that this definition of the human is already socially and politically situated.\(^{84}\) Bare life, he argues, does not account for “how deeply anchored racialization is in the somatic field of the human.”\(^{85}\) In fact, the very circulation of bare life as a generalizable concept is symptomatic of this problem. White European theorists such as Agamben and Foucault are recognized to be writing broadly about ‘life’ and ‘the human’ in a way that “minority discourses” such as black feminist theories are not.\(^{86}\) Biopolitics and bare life mourn the ways that the human is violently undone in legally and socially sanctioned modes of violence. They position their theoretical voices against this violence. Yet they implicitly center and elevate “the liberal humanist figure of Man” as the desirable default, the human as it should be—and would be, were it not for biopolitical intrusions on his wellbeing.\(^{87}\)

Part of what disturbs Agamben, as Weheliye illustrates, is the sense that boundaries between who is and is not bare life are wearing away. Bare life creeps gradually but undeniably beyond distinct social locations, threatening to swallow ‘us’ all. Biopower differentially targets human beings, but always inclines essentially toward the creation of bare life. The zone of indistinction between \textit{zoe} and \textit{bios} has, in modernity, resulted in the indistinguishability of homo sacer from secure personhood. There is “no longer any one clear figure of the sacred man…perhaps because we are all virtually \textit{hominis sacri}.”\(^{88}\) Weheliye critically observes that Agamben neglects to explain “why certain subjects are structurally more susceptible to personifying [bare life’s]

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\(^{84}\) Ibid., 5.
\(^{85}\) Ibid., 4.
\(^{86}\) Ibid., 6.
\(^{87}\) Ibid., 8.
\(^{88}\) Agamben, \textit{Homo Sacer}, 155; cited in Weheliye, 34-5.
actualization,” even if the potential to do so is ostensibly universal. And indeed, bare life names the status of the problem when those who were formerly assured of secure human status are also under threat of being stripped down, bared, and exposed to death.

Weheliye poses related political and academic challenges. He is concerned that bare life and biopolitics do not give adequate tools for understanding “racism, genocide, legal exclusion, torture, and humanity,” and he points out that black feminist scholars (and other writers of color) have rigorously theorized these phenomena. Those who wish to combat these injustices will, Weheliye argues, misdiagnose problems and mistake their solutions by following too closely Eurocentric theories. The problem is not that Foucault and Agamben deny the reality of race. Rather, they situate “racial difference in a field prior to and at a distance from conceptual contemplation.” For them, race is a real thing exploited by biopolitics rather than a notion of difference created by biopolitics in action.

Even theories that attempt to critique racist violence thus, in Weheliye’s account, reinscribe colonialist and racializing assumptions. Bare life is not life stripped of its qualities, but receives the status of bare or naked, is marked as unqualified life, by its immersion in systems of hierarchy and valuation. Weheliye clarifies that, “There can be no absolute biological substance, because in the history of modernity this field always

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89 Weheliye, 35.
90 Ibid., 6-7.
91 Ibid., 7. My own reading of Agamben is, as should be obvious from the above, somewhat more complicated but in sympathy with this assessment. Foucault, in my assessment, has a quite different view of race than Weheliye describes. While I would locate the beginning of modern racism earlier than where Foucault places it in the nineteenth century, he frames racial concepts and categories as mythical and biopolitical. They are instruments created for the purpose of managing populations and nation-states. Race is thus eugenic at its inception in a manner that becomes increasingly biologized in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries [Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 148-50]. See also Foucault’s lectures at the Collège de France.
already appears in the form of racializing assemblages.”92 Blackness understood as an assemblage reminds us that discourse brings knowledge and its objects into being as such. Black does not modify the noun human; instead, blackness and Man as definitive, ultimate human are politically generated and relationally articulated.93

The theoretical task as understood by Weheliye is “to disarticulate the human” from liberal European notions of Man.94 His guiding source for this work is the philosophical corpus of Sylvia Wynter. He follows, in particular, her emphasis on identifying social designations as “objects of knowledge” constructed through discourse rather than “real objects.”95 This clearly applies to Man as he figures humanity, but also when diasporic thinkers take recourse to versions of ‘peoplehood,’ as occurs often in counterhegemonic projects in ethnic studies. It is an issue, Wynter argues and Weheliye echoes, of taking the map for the territory, of seeking to escape degrading hierarchies while leaving untouched “reigning conceptions of community.”96 Such theories inadvertently perpetuate a naturalizing mode of thought that maintains origin (and thus, implicitly, biology) as the “spectral grammar” of its discourse.97

Wynter’s approach is at once global and appreciative of localized, specific struggles to assert humanity against the dominance of Man. That Man is regarded “as naturally ordained to inhabit the space of full humanity” is a prevailing problem that

92 Ibid., 65.
93 Ibid., 32.
94 Ibid.
95 Ibid., 31.
96 Ibid., 30. See also Sylvia Wynter, “On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Reimprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of Désiré: Black Studies Toward the Human Project,” in I Am Because We Are: Readings in Africana Philosophy, ed. Fred Lee Hord (Mzee Lasana Okpara) and Jonathan Scott Lee (Amherst and Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016).
97 Ibid., 31.
manifests variously across colonial and racialized contexts.\footnote{Ibid., 28.} It is insufficient, and actually counterproductive, to compare across national or linguistic boundaries, since this only serves to elevate historically created differences to the status of “transcendental truths.”\footnote{Ibid., 31.} Nations, languages, even skin colors become empirical objects regarded as given and stable. Instead, we should strive to transform “humanity into a relational object of knowledge,” one acknowledged to be an “ontological totality.” If we acknowledge humanity as something that is constantly being done and made, we might begin to make space for “the initiation of new humanities” that would call into question the particularities that supposedly define them.\footnote{Ibid., 32.} To do this, we need “new objects of knowledge,” new ways of understanding relationality itself that are able to examine how we go about producing the human.

It is with regard to these processes of differentiation and the production of objects of knowledge that Weheliye sees Agamben blocking the way forward. First, Agamben’s overemphasis on sovereignty’s power to kill ignores the fact that “most instantiations of bare life do not necessarily entail physical mortality per se but other forms of political death.”\footnote{Ibid., 35.} Agamben is correct that bare life encompasses more than those whose lives are exposed to death in concentration camps. Yet he does not recognize that the spread of bare life is not the spread of an exceptional condition; “racial slavery, colonialism, and indigenous genocide” are “nomoi of modern politics.”\footnote{Ibid., 38.} The projection of the death camps as ontological exception (even if it is one that he thinks is rapidly being
generalized) ignores prior forms of violently unequal relationality. It therefore misses the racial processes that contribute to constituting bare life as an object of knowledge.

As Carlo Salzani points out, it is difficult to sustain pointed critiques of Agamben’s formulation of bare life because its definition is inconsistent, slippery, and sometimes indirect. Perhaps, in a way similar to the operation of trauma I have described, bare life as a concept is best analyzed through the effects that emanate from its deployment. Weheliye stabilizes Agamben’s definition of life and bare life in ways that elide the shifting and inconsistent uses of these terms. Yet he rightly zeroes in on a tendency that Agamben shares with others, which here would include Felman and Caruth, to frame the Holocaust as central, originary, and/or exemplary.

Weheliye also levels an important critique of the way that Agamben describes bare life as the condition common to various debased subject positions. This is all the more resonant when one observes Agamben’s tendency to downplay the structural or historical particularities of any given instance of bare life. Each draws his attention as an example, as confirmation that the alarming endpoint of biopower’s modern mode of governance is stripped-down exposure to death. This feeds the sense that suffering and violence are fated rather than constructed, necessarily given rather than contingently made, and that the crisis is its encroachment on the position from which Agamben himself is writing.

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104 Salzani, 7.
105 Debarati Sanyal has the same interpretation of bare life as Weheliye, referring to it as “The subject’s reduction to pure sentient matter, to biological facticity,” which “becomes an emblem and a structural analytic that enables an inquiry into the status of all bodies before the violence of the state” [Debarati Sanyal, Memory and Complicity: Migrations of Holocaust Remembrance (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 31].
Weheliye thus makes a convincing argument that bare life is unavoidably inscribed in discourses that project a normative version of humanity. His turn to Wynter makes sense, as she helpfully orients the theoretical gaze to processes of social differentiation; this is crucial for analyzing how both proper humanity and bare life are produced. Yet Weheliye largely overlooks the importance of theological thinking in Wynter’s account of western Man’s racialized and racializing history. Wynter centers original sin and the Fall in her historical overview of how Race ascended over the course of European history to the place of God. In her 1989 essay “Beyond the Word of Man: Glissant and the New Discourse of the Antilles,” Wynter argues that the biological, evolutionarily selected version of the human that has been instrumental in contemporary racial ideologies is a rewriting of original sin and the Fall. It belongs to a “tradition of discourse” that guided Western Europe “from 1512 onward…[through] the secularization of human existence,” but is legitimated and affirmed by its imitation of the Christian story of the Fall.

Christianity, in Wynter’s account, consolidated ‘earlier’ representations of abjection and otherness by aligning ontological lack with original sin. The Genesis story provided an origin story and an explanation for the lack separating “all mankind” from “‘true’ being.” This development solidified a ritual construct (abjection and otherness) as an ostensibly given concept (ontological lack). In a feudal context, pre-

106 Sylvia Wynter, “Beyond the Word of Man,” 639.
107 Ibid., 641. It is unclear in this passage whether Wynter is suggesting that otherness and abjection are human universals that either precede or necessarily operate through culturally specific forms (or both). Her citation of Julia Kristeva in the passage under discussion might suggest as much. It is also possible, however, that she is looking to Kristeva as a perceptive analyst of the particular tradition to which she responds. What is clear is that the historical process Wynter traces is that of European Christianity’s development through first an internal class/caste structure, and then colonial engagements.
baptismal laity represented the unredeemed fallen whose status contrasted with that of celibate clergy. As European humanist discourses emerged, “Adamic enslavement to Original Sin was transferred to that of potential human enslavement to its lower sensory nature.” Its fullest embodiment in the context of colonialism was delineated through a “binary opposition between the European settlers and the New World peoples (indios) and enslaved peoples of Africa (Negroes).”

Irrationality and excessive bodilyness was ascribed to non-white people, as well as to poor or ‘mad’ Europeans who could not attain to the status of Man. Echoing and citing Foucault, Wynter notes that “a lack of racial ‘normalcy’” came to stand in for ontological lack. The ‘Word’ that Wynter names in her title thus marks the inheritance of an historically Christian mode of dividing up humanity into categories of greater and lesser being: “A shift had therefore been effected from the Word of the Christian to that of rational-nature Man.”

Distance from whiteness, usually measured in terms of proximity to blackness, became the ultimate measure of being.

While Wynter sees the secularization of Man as a long and gradual process, the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* and *Descent of Man* marks a turning point that redefines “the human species as divinely created” in evolutionary terms: “the human as a selected being.” Rather than equalizing human being by recognizing biological commonalities, however, physiognomic hierarchies were made evidence of superior and inferior selection. It is for this reason that Wynter declares that evolutionary discourse

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108 Ibid., 641.
109 Ibid., 641-2.
110 Ibid., 641.
111 Ibid., 640.
112 The exact locus of advocacy for this interpretation is unclear. It seems, however, as if Wynter is primarily marking a shift in which discourses were considered broadly authoritative, which
has served as a screen that pseudoscientifically elides “any questions about being—about, that is, how as human we attain to human beingness and do so now in a profane or secular rather than sacred modality.”\textsuperscript{113} One sees embedded in Wynter’s comments a critique that conceptual associations between lack and race cover over \textit{processes} of racialization. Scientific discourse purports to demonstrate differences that are innate, natural, and therefore unquestionably valid.

These processes sacralize racialization and its effects. In shifting the European definition of Man from a rationally to biologically focused one, Wynter observes that “a new ‘space of Otherness’ term \textsuperscript{sic} now took the place of that of God. This new term was that of Race.”\textsuperscript{114} Race is the inscrutable ordering principle that secures identities and boundaries, that founds morality and meaning. For Agamben, the endpoint of biopolitics brings about universal subjection to the ban that creates bare life. This might be thought of as a re-universalization of original sin and the Fall. Yet Wynter, as Weheliye rightly argues, keeps us from plunging analytically into this leveling mode of perception. We may all, as it turns out, be caught in biopolitical machinery that treats our lives as raw material and is indifferent to the human costs of its projects. Because this project is fundamentally guided by Race taken for God, however, race guides the situational logics that place and push actual lives into the position of homo sacer.

The sacred ‘man’ who is fallen, and who reminds others of their own potential to become so, is directly or indirectly produced through racialization. In a self-confirming

\textsuperscript{113} Wynter, “Beyond the Word of Man,” 640.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 642.
circle, the harm produced by racialization becomes evidence for the truth of race: Racial others

now functioned at the level of empirical reality as the embodiment of the dysgenic Other, as ‘proof’ therefore of the functioning of an infranatural process of genetic selection as the new that-which-is-in-itself that guarantees the now purely secular model of the absolute subject in its bourgeois conceptualization.\textsuperscript{115}

If racial others are apparently disadvantaged, suffering or unable to thrive, this is attributable to biologically pre-determined destiny. This logic rationalizes racial hierarchies and elides the construction of race as a social, political, and economic project. Its issuing from a theology of the Fall, moreover, suggests a moral dimension to supposedly biological condemnation.

This fits with the tendency I have critiqued to frame victims of violence rather than violent persons or forces as somehow fallen. My contention is not that theories of trauma set this pattern, but that they reinforce and validate it, even elevate it as definitive for social and political ethics. We thus become accustomed, as a habit of thought, to regard those who suffer as deficient, their violation as evidence of a need for spiritual redemption.\textsuperscript{116} For those whose fallenness is related to or based on race, the possibility of being redeemed seems especially distant, even impossible. If the Fall is written on one’s own skin, if bare life or trauma is as Fanon might say epidermalized,\textsuperscript{117} then what can theories of trauma and bare life do but reinforce non-whiteness as less-than-human, to continually pathologize it as humanity gone wrong and undone?

**Conclusions: Breakdowns and Foundations**

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{116} This significantly furthers and deepens my initial problematizations of contemporary Christian theologies of trauma in Chapter One.
\textsuperscript{117} Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).
Wynter argues that critiques of theories of being do not preceed, in time or in thought, their corresponding material struggles. The intelligentsia’s struggles with philosophy, still individual and particular insofar as they grapple with existential questions, are on the terrain of ‘being.’ And while ideas of being are related to particular struggles for justice, they are not identical. This is why Wynters declares that “Antillean intellectuals have reenacted the empirical struggles of the popular forces at the level of ideas and of imaginative discourse.”

Scholarly philosophical writers stand in secondary and often derivative relation to material struggles against domination.

Yet Wynter does not for that reason argue that philosophy is unimportant or pointless. Rather, the fact that (elite) theory always lags behind practice demonstrates that epistemology is not static or irredeemably locked into historical patterns. If it feels nearly impossible to think humanity without the Fall and redemption, without the shadow of ethnoclass Man hovering over attempts to imagine the human, there are still ways in which humanity is happening differently. One task of the theorist is to find language that can feed emerging genres of humanity, expressing not only devastating histories of loss but also ongoing forms of creation.

The inseparability of life from death is a fact that infuses trauma and biopolitical theories. Trauma’s undoing of subjectivity parallels bare life as Agamben applies the term to situations of extreme deprivation, oppression, and violence. Bare life might seem to provide a compelling way of thinking about how lives are differentially vulnerable to trauma, but it extends into a broader discourse about the potential of life in general that brings with it centuries of unexamined colonial, racial, and gendered problems.

Agamben’s discourse privileges the philosopher morally and existentially, framing those

118 Ibid., 640.
who are most vulnerable as ontological Others and intransigent (perhaps even natural) objects of reflection. This is especially evident in his approach to women’s nudity as stubbornly withholding, and as somehow itself animating sadistic desires to take it apart.

Agamben is of course correct that coercion underlies what is theorized to be a voluntary social contract. Against this background, bare life demonstrates that rendering some lives liminal and exposed is an implicit condition of not only authoritarian but also democratic social order. Because law never securely or finally fixes the bounds of acceptable violence (insofar as exceptional violence may be called for), all subjects are hypothetically exposed. This is a minimal reading of Agamben’s declaration that all are becoming bare life, which acknowledges that no one is permanently, eternally protected. The loss of privileged protection is what Agamben most strongly laments, and Weheliye sharply and rightly objects to this selective concern about ‘becoming bare life.’

Trauma and bare life are posited as human conditions that offer possible grounds for solidarity. Both are created in history, so are not timeless essences, and both wager that humans ought to be able to recognize each other through what they share or have in common. The search for what is the same about the Other can doubtless ground forms of empathy that might (though it is still not guaranteed) enable ethical relations. Just as bare life is a condition to which Agamben argues ‘we’ are all potentially and increasingly subject, trauma in Caruth’s account also permeates experience by way of a shared bodily vulnerability. For Agamben, homo sacer is life made sacred by its exposure to death. For Caruth, the Fall that dooms theory to failure is also the grace that enables its reference. Theory issues from exposed bodies, bearing the marks of embodied suffering and

119 Sanyal diagnoses this problem in terms that signal its colonialist impulse: “It also co-opts the figure of the victim as an ‘other’ who is but an avatar of ourselves” (Memory and Complicity, 37).
imperfection. The body which cannot cover itself as a body is what bare life and trauma hold in common.

Caruth insists that the necessary (if not necessarily possible) ethical task is to awaken to the ways in which we are implicated in one another’s traumas. Yet the theoretical performance that centers trauma makes such an awakening less likely. It encourages a search for a common substance or principle, when discrepancies in experience are probably better indicators of where such complications occur. Similarly with bare life, the emphasis on our all succumbing to biopower seems to divert attention from the connections between the ways in which subjects are biopolitically situated and implicated.

Weheliye aims to carve out a space between theory that sees the breadth of a claim as indicating its greater importance or validity, and an understandable but ultimately counter-productive response that declares only the particular to be really real. He follows Wynter’s challenge to this distinction, arguing that the knowledge, histories, and practices of oppressed people create theories of the human. The broad and general can only be reached by traveling through particularity and difference, the multiplicity of ways that humanity can be done on individual and collective scales.

The connection I am drawing between trauma and bare life is something more than analogy and less than identification. These are not the same performatively constituted theoretical objects. Yet they have many structural features in common that warrant their joint examination—situating the Holocaust as both nadir and epitome of the defining features of modernity, positing ungraspable states that are perceived primarily as

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120 Here I intend reference to trauma as discursively constituted by Caruth, applicable in varying degrees to the term’s other uses.
absence or traces, and asserting that their (trauma and bare life’s) operations undo central conceits about the status and capacities of western Man. For both, trauma and bare life are the unreachable real on which the law depends.  

The state of exception shares a certain geometry with the concept of trauma—simultaneously center and limit, they both constitute the ‘normal’ experience that they violate. Both are void in a way that nonetheless determines the substance they oppose. Again, my goal is not comparison but aggregation, aiming to understand how these concepts argue almost in unison for a particular understanding of ‘humanity’ in a concentration camp universe (Agamben) and an age of trauma (Caruth). Agamben’s declaration that ‘we’ are all bare life in present biopolitical arrangements echoes Caruth’s repeated declarations about ‘our’ situatedness in an age of trauma in which ‘we’ are all haunted and called to awaken.

Caruth begins to acknowledge the devastation wrought by Man, and undermines conceits about Man’s asymptotic approach to perfection. She does not, however, ask what humans there may be besides Man, or whether trauma as a concept derives its meaning from a picture of Man undone. The events of the Holocaust register the diabolical force that gathered behind attempts to secure salvation by securing whiteness. Phrased this way, we can propose to tilt Caruth’s interpretation of Kleist and Kant. Insofar as theory promised to transcend bodily particularity, it projected that the theorist could be absorbed into universalized Man. The aesthetics of this mode of theorization require continual performance of this possibility, of hoping for and striving toward it. The

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121 Caruth makes her most explicitly Lacanian claims at this juncture.
122 This phrase comes originally from concentration camp survivor David Rousset who wrote *L’Univers Concentrationaire* (1946).
dance of theory cultivates desire to inhabit the position of universal Man, and failures to be the universal constitute failures of thought and understanding.

In other words, one becomes Man to the extent that one can be perceived as Man. There are usually bodily requirements, but one must also reason and act as Man, and align one’s thought with universality. This is the categorical imperative taken to its performative conclusion. J. Kameron Carter’s reading of Frederick Douglass’s 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, formulated as a confession akin to Augustine’s, looks at how Douglass frames his universal humanity as original and preexisting. It was lost, or rather stolen, and then dramatically regained in the struggle to prove himself worthy of freedom.\(^{123}\) Carter powerfully shows how even this sharply critical mode of thought assumes the centrality of Man. This raises questions of political strategy and necessity, even as ‘necessity’ might be one of the concepts Carter would have us interrogate. Yet there is also the issue that the theorizing subject (quite fairly) longs to be recognized as one who thinks. This inevitably comparative logic is, again, justifiable on many circumstantial grounds, “but it repeats the very form of the self from which it seeks liberation.”\(^{124}\) What Weheliye and Carter both realize is that granting comparison validity keeps us stuck in calculating hierarchies of humanity.\(^{125}\)

The gaze of a theory that aligns the Fall with sin from a position of power seeks to find in the undone Other, freshly exposed to observation and scrutiny, transcendent revelations—perhaps even pleasurable satisfaction. That satisfaction cannot be attained

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\(^{124}\) Ibid., 289.

\(^{125}\) Weheliye, 11, 13.
might lead the observer to conclude that this is the wrong kind of other, never bare enough, a bit too defiant. This other does not compel interest, attraction, or empathy in the way the ‘real’ other would. As I argued in relation to Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery*, bare life as constructed by Agamben contains an ideal form of violated, suffering subjectivity. People whose experiences and/or social position align them with trauma or bare life might be defined in oppositional terms to ideal western Man. Additionally, there are those whose pain, loss, and subjection to violence does not register as bare life or trauma. In both cases, harm and injury do not convey or elicit pathos because the subjects involved do not or cannot adhere to certain visions of nudity or trauma.

If trauma and bare life are Man undone, what does that mean for subjects who never, in the best of circumstances, look like Man? If naked life is meant to evince exposure and helplessness, and trauma a wounded state requiring the attention of therapist or bystander as witness, does this explain at least some of the resentment and hostility that often meets disempowered people and group’s assertions of autonomy, agency, and self-knowledge? Is there a way in which these discourses about the undoing of the self by extreme violence actually limit who can claim a self and how? I have argued here that one driving factor in these arrangements is embedded narratives of an original fall from grace. While full redemption may or may not be possible, there is a proper and recognizable way to be fallen and redeemable. Wandering too far outside of these bounds raises the question of whether one could ever be restored, be the recipient of grace, and be brought to the level of the human.
‘Un imaginable boundaries’

Chapter 5

Aesthetics and Abandonment

Preface: Falling/Folding

I concluded the previous chapter with this question: If trauma and bare life are Man undone, what does that mean for subjects who never, in the best of circumstances, look like Man? Experimental writer Bhanu Kapil describes her character Ban as

She’s both dead and never living: the part, that is, of life that is never given: an existence. What, for example, is born in England, but is never, not even on a cloudy day, English?

Answer: Ban.

And from Ban: “banlieues.”¹

The ban is the condition in which Agamben finds homo sacer, one whose abandonment is exposure to harm and death. “What is captured in the sovereign ban is a human victim who may be killed but not sacrificed: homo sacer.”² The human victim is somehow also inhuman, deprived of a status that would designate her life as real and meaningful.

This state resonates with Elizabeth Povinelli’s theorization of situations in which subjects are “aggressively abandoned within a temporal horizon of a future perspective: a future from whose perspective their present suffering has already been mourned and buried.”³ Kapil’s Ban, a brown child of immigrants, is dead and never living to Kapil herself, who cannot write the novel of Ban’s death. She knows the story, which goes

Ban is a girl walking home from school just as a protest starts to escalate. Pausing at the corner of the Uxbridge Road, she hears something: the far-off sound of breaking glass. Is it coming from her home or is it coming from the street’s distant clamor? Faced with these two sources of a sound she instinctively links to violence, the potential of violent acts, Ban lies down. She folds to the ground. This is syntax.  

Is syntax the same as a plot? One might ask, instead, does Ban fall when she lies down? Perhaps there is some difference between folding and falling, but how else could lying down be death? There is something too fixed and necessary, too predetermined in the grammar of everyday life and violence, that makes the story seem not to be one. Syntax is structure, not event.

The novel that Kapil wants to write is nonetheless based on real events, a ‘race riot’ that broke out in Southall, Middlesex (“an immigrant suburb” or banlieue of London) on April 23rd, 1979. It began with a gathering of anti-racist protestors, 3,000 people who came to express their opposition outside of a pre-election meeting of the National Front (an all-white, racist and anti-immigrant political party that was at peak membership and activity in 1979). Almost as many police officers were dispatched and Blair Peach, who Kapil refers to as “the martyr of my novel” died after being struck by a member of the Metropolitan Police Special Patrol Group.  

Ban en Banlieue, the book Kapil publishes which is not the novel she planned, engages with personal memory and public record, religious and literary imagination, experiments with performance art and with her own (or the narrator’s) body in time and space. She performs healing and mourning rituals, has conversations, and posts to a blog.

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4 Kapil, 31.
The description of the accumulation of these processes never amounts to a separate work. An artistically arranged account of all of these efforts becomes the work itself; what was done in order to tell a story becomes the thing, or things, worth relating.

**Aesthetic Hopes**

This dissertation has asked why contemporary theories of trauma and bare life root themselves in structures of thought that resemble the Christian theological Fall. It could be that the way fallenness operates in accounting for harm and violence is less useful for understanding trauma itself than for analyzing the logic by which trauma is portrayed and intellectually metabolized, even systemically enabled and justified. Shoshana Felman’s proposal that the Fall is both the one who literally falls and the complicity of the one who witnesses (examined in Chapter Three) might point in this direction. Race, gender, class, sexuality, religion—the formation and fluid repetition of these categories as modes of ‘othering’—are only some of the vectors along which trauma is repeatedly structured and justified. The Fall is a potent framework for such categories’ operation because it ties social, political, and material forms of alienation to a moral one. One of my main arguments throughout this dissertation is that this convergence tends to invert attributions of blame and control, distorting the ethics of discourses that are no doubt sincere about their stated concern for victims.

The division of the world into perpetrators and victims recalls an older dualism between good and evil in the philosophy of religion, one often explored through the question of theodicy. There are thus two theological narratives that coexist in varying degrees of interaction and tension: the notion that undeserved suffering occurs and needs to be accounted for, and the notion that humans are *all* morally wretched, because fallen,
and deserve to suffer in the present life and beyond. These two ways of framing morality and suffering, both discourses that fixate on guilt and innocence, continue to restrict the terms in which theologians are able to engage trauma. Although theory and theology share many of these problems, when theodicy and original sin infiltrate putatively non-theological accounts of trauma it is difficult to know under what terms to seek accountability. There is no requirement, as there might be for theologies, to follow the theological frameworks they deploy to their conclusions or to grapple with their inconsistencies.

The previous chapter’s examination of Agamben on nudity and its connections to nuda vita (naked, or bare, life) highlighted the aesthetic dimensions of the practices by which we define humanity and identify harm. This chapter continues to build on the argument, while connecting it to the line of thought begun in relation to Cathy Caruth. Cathy Caruth’s chapter on falling, the curious center of Unclaimed Experience, deploys a de Manian deconstructive theory that regards the mundane and the catastrophic as existing in unavoidably close proximity. I noted that Caruth reads around the passages in de Man and Kant that deal directly with the sublime, and raised questions about what it means to take other people’s traumatic experiences as occasions for theoretical reflection and performance. This chapter will undoubtedly fail to answer to those questions. It will, nonetheless, take them up in relation to aesthetic processes and theories. Kant, Schiller, and de Man all posit that something ethical could arise from aesthetic engagement.

I look in this chapter at Gayatri Chakravorty’s proposal to ‘sabotage’ Schiller’s aesthetic education. Schiller’s is a discourse most assuredly invested in the construction of Man that the last chapter began to pull apart. Yet his sense that aesthetic training might
teach one how to ‘play’ in a way that loosens cognitive patterns and habits is a site of ambiguous promise. In an interview with Cathy Caruth, Spivak states, “Knowledge is upstream from reading because it’s the construction of an object to know. In order to know, you have to be trained in how to construct an object of knowledge.” My own methods thus far has been to examine trauma and bare life’s construction as objects in contemporary theory. Aesthetic education in the mode Spivak envisions can rearrange one’s sense of how knowing might occur, teaching one “how to learn from the singular and unverifiable.” I find this an important possibility to consider given that ‘the singular and unverifiable’ are precisely what I see unaccounted for in the consolidation of discourse about trauma and bare life.

I set Bhanu Kapil’s Ban beside Spivak for the tense uncertainties Ban raises about literary engagement as a safe space apart from high stakes situations. On the one hand, Kapil would seem at even a further remove from everyday life and language than most of the novelists and poets Spivak engages. An experimental writer (and visual and performance artist) who mixes media and genres between and within particular works, Kapil does not have the popular appeal of some one like Rabindranath Tagore (Thakur). There is, however, an intensely ‘worldly’ element to Kapil’s work that foregrounds the embodied, historical writer and her creative process. These writerly struggles are transmitted as readerly ones in ways that trouble the boundary between the inside and outside of the text.

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7 Ibid., 1021.
8 Among Tagore’s recognitions are a Nobel Prize in Literature and the adoption of his works as the Indian and Bangladeshi national anthems.
Aesthetic Education and Theories of Trauma

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s collection of essays, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, is an unsettled text, a volume on literary pedagogy that says and unsays its prescriptions for reading, teaching, and self-formation. It hopes, often against itself, to locate ways that humanities education can ‘intervene’ in both local and global capitalist socioeconomic systems. Spivak repeatedly names her desire for both educators and students “to acknowledge our part and hope in capitalism [in order to] bring that hope to a persistent and principled crisis.” Aesthetic analysis is thus a mode of unpacking one’s ideological surroundings.

Although what seem like prescriptive recommendations and programmatic mission statements are often punctuated by negations such as “False hope,” Spivak’s disowned suggestions remain present on the page. A different loss of hope, the one that would release us from expecting justice under capitalism, remains as an imperative even as the reader is confronted with Spivak’s sense of its improbability. The call to rhetorically analyze literature for the purpose of wearing away at such a hope is maintained as desirable, even as the comments Spivak adds during the editing phase of the essays’ collection assert its impossibility.

I would propose that the placement of the Fall within the theories of trauma and extremity encountered thus far—in Herman, Caruth, and Agamben—tacitly performs an aesthetic education. Arguments such as Herman’s train us to regard those who are harmed as fallen in a way that suggests they are lacking, diminished in their humanity, and in need of both personal and social redemption. In scanning for wholeness and its

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10 Ibid.
lack, there are survivors who are saved and unsaved, redeemed and lost. The aesthetic that values coherent, continuous narratives sets up an evaluative standard for recovery. While clinical or medical frameworks may need to set some standards of measurement, I have suggested that Herman assigns unwarranted neutrality to the position of the clinician who helps patients to formulate their stories according to a largely predetermined logic.

For Caruth, falling represents universal human exposure and vulnerability. Yet it is represented and understood through those for whom such catastrophes materialize. Caruth does not analyze the ways in which people are unevenly exposed to violence or disaster. Nor does she ask what it means for the forms of interconnection she values that human beings make (relatively) conscious choices to directly and indirectly commit much of the violence that causes trauma. This is not only a matter of neglecting “the slow violence of structural oppression” in an emphasis on punctual events, though that is a valid concern. It also decontextualizes dramatic events in a way that elides their continuity with widespread, everyday patterns of harm and inequality. The image of trauma as falling works two ways, positing an ‘always already’ condition in which particular events hardly count, and paradoxically feeding an aesthetic that associates it with sudden disruption, a break in otherwise smooth movement.

For Agamben, humanity undone is meant to provide special insight into what it means to be human. Not only does this posit that the human is primarily recognized on the basis of sameness rather than difference, but it indirectly moralizes social hierarchies. Those considered fallen are those who are exposed to violence and death under ‘the ban.’

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11 The example of Tancred and Clorinda with which Caruth opens Unclaimed Experience and to which she returns in the Afterword to the 20th anniversary edition is a case of unconscious and involuntary repetition of violence. It is one of the rare moments in which she focuses intently on the perspective and experience of the one who wounds. See Chapter 3.

12 Stef Craps, Trauma Out of Bounds, 57.
Nudity is the condition of original sin, and naked life is a paradoxically inhuman condition. Sexual and racial degradation are entangled sadistically in the gaze that ostensibly searches for common humanity.

Decolonizing Aesthetic Education

Spivak’s argument for the importance of aesthetic education is both a defense of the humanities’ place in tertiary education and a much larger critique of class-based conceptions of schooling. In focusing on the ways that she theorizes fiction, I am anxious not to elide the fact that this theory arises out of ongoing teaching practices that Spivak reflects on, recounting many stages of hope and disappointment, trial and error. The collection itself is multivocal in ways that I alluded to above, written over more than twenty years. Yet it persistently revolves around questions about what literary education might hope to do and ways that assessing ingrained modes of understanding can push against habituated acceptance of injustice.

Like Caruth, Spivak is drawn to de Man’s grappling with Schiller, who he reads as turning “the stalling of philosophy at the transcendental deduction into a chiastic reversibility.” What de Man reads as Schiller’s mistake, his veering away from the rigors and restraints of Kantian reason, is framed as not only understandable, but necessary. If rhetoric inclines us to rush past questions about the deep conditions and structures of experience, this is not always or entirely a bad thing.

[C]an we draw out a rule of thumb here from what already exists [in de Man’s theorization of ideology]—that attention to rhetoric will alert us to the staging of idealism subverting the critical? This attention is ideology critique, and, if we combine this with

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14 Ibid., 24.
15 This point is discussed in greater depth in my reading of de Man in Chapter 3.
the post-Althusserian conclusion that ideology allows us to live, it may lead us toward the responsibility of the “intended mistake.”

Can our goal be to become more conscious of the mistakes that we make in order to hold our world together—not with the aim to cease making them entirely, but in recognition that imagination mediates our relationship to what Althusser called our “real conditions of existence.” Following the rather Kantian observation that such access is always mediated, can efforts to examine rhetoric and alter epistemology enable us to more directly and honestly face the choices we make about how to perceive? Can such work involve actively striving to break ideological habits that we have come to recognize as damaging? This seems to me to be the hope at the core of anti-colonial theory.

Spivak attributes to de Man an observation that could easily apply to both attempts to theorize trauma and the debates that swirl around them: “I will suggest that in the end de Man finds a way to point at persistent domestication as a way to handle the aporetic.” This is how the aesthetic has sometimes been thought to reinforce ideology—“as a sphere, projected beyond social divisions and instrumental economic logic, that falsely resolves the first and compensates for the second.” The direct purpose or instrumentalization of art can be toward the ends of smoothing over rather than stirring up contradiction and disruption. What I am suggesting, along with Spivak, is that whether this is the case depends not only on which works one engages—their form and content—but also on the methods with which one engages them. Rhetorical analysis can disrupt

16 Spivak, AE, 25.
18 Spivak, AE, 24.
rhetoric’s smoothing operations, and while the text itself might encourage or discourage such a move, it is ultimately up to the reader.

While reading is a fully embodied activity, the distance between fiction and reality is key for Spivak because, “that the protocol of fiction gives us a practical simulation of the graver discontinuities inhabiting (and operating?) the ethico-epistemic and the ethico-political.”20 The stakes are lower in a situation of reading, even if “some of us will of course continue to want to say that fiction offers us an experience of the discontinuities that remain in place ‘in real life’.”21 This is what opens up a space of play (in a quasi-Schillerian sense) with frameworks of understanding, allowing us to see the contingency and historicity of what we take for granted. Differently situated subjects will experience and gain different things from such a process. Education is not doing all it should if it does not give subaltern subjects “access to the public sphere.”22 For those at the other end of spectrums of privilege, it ought to restore “the more robust imperative to responsibility which capitalist social productivity was obliged to destroy.”23 All actors in this scenario are responsible participants, as “both the dominant and the subordinate must jointly rethink themselves as intended or interpellated by planetary alterity.”24 Aesthetic education in this mode is a process of working through one’s perceptions and interpretations of difference.

Spivak makes no pretense that the humanities can save humanity— at least not the university humanities, and not in a political sense: “The only hope for me lies at the

20 Spivak, AE, 317.
21 Ibid., 317.
22 Ibid., 332.
23 Ibid., 344.
24 Ibid., 347.
subaltern end; and that cannot inform a university press book!”25 I am curious about this pre-stated limit on what can be done in academic discourse, and the extent to which it might be used to elide accountability for aesthetic choices. Yet this hope is not a cynical one, and even borders on its own romanticizations, “an unexamined conviction in the history-defying originality of the aboriginal”26 that oversimplifies matters of controversy and responsibility in both elite and subaltern locations. This is a possibility for which Spivak’s post-notes attempt to correct. There is indeed no guarantee that epistemological rearrangement will translate directly into more ethical living or the enactment of more just social policy. I would maintain against Spivak’s own stated disillusionment that we cannot claim to know in advance what shifts in epistemology might do. Perhaps, though, Spivak intends her declarations of hopelessness as provocations. Her declaration, “[H]ere I announce a hopelessness, because life and hope are too easily claimed by the camp of mere reason”27 may signal a tactic for reminding the reader to allow “reasonable and rational to hang out as difference.”28

Spivak’s vision of aesthetic education possesses a crucial sense of temporal order. Literary study is preparation for life in public and politics. It is a space of rehearsal that hopes to enable students and readers to meet concrete challenges with flexibility and awareness. I find such possibilities appealing and persuasive. At the same time, it is precisely the possibility of a secure separation between writing and life that Kapil calls into question.

**Failures of Education**

26 Ibid., 3.
27 Ibid., 33.
28 Ibid., 34.
One of my recurring arguments throughout this dissertation is that trauma theory alternates between contesting and ascribing to versions of rationality that render some human lives inhuman. In “‘No Humans Involved:’ An Open Letter to My Colleagues,” written shortly after the police officers who brutally beat Rodney King were acquitted, Wynter points out that it was common practice for Los Angeles jurists to classify cases involving harm to young Black men as N.H.I., “no humans involved.” The bounds of morality for policing were thus set to single out Black persons (Wynter here focuses on men, but a corresponding argument could be made about the invisibility of Black women in this discourse) as uniquely not human. Referring to a practice that today calls up chilling images of Eric Garner’s death, Wynter relates

You may remember too that in the earlier case of the numerous deaths of young Black males caused by a specific chokehold used by Los Angeles police officers to arrest young Black males, the police chief Darryl Gates explained away these judicial murders by arguing that Black males had something abnormal with their windpipes. That they had to be classified and thereby treated differently from all other North Americans, except to a secondary degree, the darker-skinned Latinos.

There is thus a biologized logic that dictates moral accountability—a supposition about anatomical difference that translates into a difference in civil status and civil rights. Yet despite the emphasis ostensibly placed on biology, the judgments police officers made in the moment can be understood as aesthetic ones. They would not know a person’s ancestry or family generations in the U.S., only whether their target looked Black, whether the person they pursued seemed to them like a ‘Black male.’ Reasoning about a given subject’s humanity, by the police officers and later the jurors, would proceed from

30 Ibid.
this aesthetic starting point. The aesthetic judgment becomes a judicial one the second it is acted on by officers charged with upholding law.  

Wynter points to the fact that the jurists who constructed and followed logics excluding Black people from humanity were deemed “the best and brightest” by the systems that trained and credentialled them. Echoing Elie Wiesel’s observation that Holocaust perpetrators were ‘the heirs of Kant and Goethe,’ and as an educator writing to other educators, Wynter asks, “What was wrong with their education?”  

I take this strong warning about education, and would note, even as I seek and suggest areas of aesthetic promise, that strikingly similar practices of racist reasoning also exist in the world of poetry. Members of the academic establishment that intentionally deal with issues of aesthetics and ethics participate in similar logics in breathtaking (in all senses) ways. This fact recently surfaced in relation to Marjorie Perloff’s extemporaneous defense of Kenneth Goldsmith at the “Where Were We” conference held on December 6, 2015 at the ArtWriting Festival in Aarhus, Denmark. Goldsmith had recently recited an edited version of Michael Brown’s autopsy report as poetry. Goldsmith interpreted critiques of his portrayal of decontextualized Black suffering as an indication of success: “The document I read from is powerful. My reading of it is powerful. How could it be otherwise?” He further argued that his performance was

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31 This is a notable rhetorical choice in Wynter’s essay, an alternative framework from the one that would claim police killings are extrajudicial because they bypass due process.
32 Wynter, “No Humans,” 60.
fully responsible because it aligned with the writing practice he has used for thirty years, the consistency indicating that its methods were a matter of principle.\textsuperscript{34}

Perloff’s comments on the incident were recorded and transcribed verbatim by Jen Hofer: “I think the romanticization, where everybody kept calling him the poor child Michael Brown…Many of the pictures you saw, he looks like a little kid, he was a 300-pound huge man. Scary. He was scary, I’m just saying...”\textsuperscript{35} Such an overt rationalization of racist violence indicated, for Hofer and others, a sensibility behind both Perloff’s work and her repeated affirmation of Goldsmith and his methods.\textsuperscript{36}

Goldsmith refers to his poetic method as ‘uncreative writing.’ Forbidding students from any act of creation, he insists that they reuse writing already in circulation. In one assignment, they retype five pages of any text. In his own words,

The trick in uncreative writing is airtight accountability. If you can defend your choices from every angle, then the writing is a success. On the other hand, if your methodology and justification is sloppy, the work is doomed to fail.\textsuperscript{37}

A writer’s response to information overload, which is framed as both an aesthetic and ethical stance, Goldsmith contends, ought to be to refuse to create more writing. This claim to rigor and responsibility is framed as the opposite of ‘recklessness’ and supplemented with ostensible social and political awareness: “Why is it on generic white computer paper when the original edition was on thick, yellowed, pulpy stock? What

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{34} Ibid. From Fred Moten’s “On Marjorie Perloff”: “If only someone had whispered in his ear: if you can’t find something good to re-say then don’t re-say anything at all” [Fred Moten, “On Marjorie Perloff,” in Entropy, Dec. 28, 2015, https://entropymag.org/on-marjorie-perloff/].
\item \textsuperscript{35} Jen Hofer, “If You Hear Something Say Something, or If You’re Not at the Table You’re on the Menu,” in Entropy, Dec. 18, 2015, https://entropymag.org/if-you-hear-something-say-something-or-if-youre-not-at-the-table-youre-on-the-menu/.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Again, it is not only a question about motivations, but also effects, because “the choices such gatekeepers [as Perloff] make have very real social and political effects” (Ibid.)
\end{itemize}
does it say about you: your aesthetic, economic, social, and political circumstances?  
There is ostensibly a principled restraint to this work, with an accompanying claim to be avant the avant garde (Goldsmith also endorses writing for robot audiences).  
What is most striking about Goldsmith’s writing about writing, however, is the notion that creativity is impossible and its attempt irresponsible. Goldsmith frames his project as a moral one, presenting uncreativity as an imperative for writers in a technocratic culture awash in under-attended language.  
Yet he neglects that he is in fact creating as he selects, redacts, and performs texts written by others.

Forbidden creativity is a pretense at modesty, a pretense that is refuted by the absolute access that Goldsmith assumes to any language produced by others. Poetry does not escape theory’s potential to overgeneralize or intrude, being yet another domain in which, “Whiteness presumes accessibility to all spaces and people.”  
It is, then, as dangerous a terrain as theory for dealing with violence and trauma. Perloff and Goldsmith demonstrate that poetry and literary community have a potent ability to trivialize, obscure, and insult. As in theoretical domains, oppressive harm is routinely reinscribed by writers who believe themselves to be doing ethical work. I cite Perloff and Goldsmith not so much because they resemble theorists of trauma and bare life, but because poetry is often thought to be categorically more sensitive than theory to political and ethical subtlety. I simply wish to point out that this starting point cannot be taken for granted,

38 Ibid.
40 It is also worth noting that both Perloff and Goldsmith write prolifically on matters of pedagogy.
and that changing genres does not ensure better results. That an education is ‘aesthetic’ is no guarantee that it will improve ethics.

The impossibility of guarantee is, moreover, the central challenge of aesthetic education in Spivak’s account. She reminds the reader about the great burden that falls on interpretation even when literature is well chosen, because “Literature is not a blueprint for action.”\(^{42}\) Restoring a sense of responsibility is precisely what is at stake, becoming “defective for capitalism” by refusing to take the global view that would abstract human life and consequences.\(^ {43}\)

The Kantian hope or promise that the aesthetic might rescue reason from its own limitations is, for de Man and Caruth, the point at which rhetoric fills in for logic. The sublime is located at these same junctures, where Kant’s own faith in reason seems uncharacteristically unsteady. An unexplained expectation that one might find privileged access to truth or reality in aesthetics resembles one of the ways that an understanding of trauma is understood in literary theory. The claim that literary language can take over where reason reaches its limit, and that it provides a means to more realistically and accountably approach trauma, answers anxieties regarding the ways that rational structures are overlain onto phenomena that by definition exceed them. Such a claim, moreover, occurs both within literary studies and outside of it.\(^ {44}\)

I am making the (perhaps obvious) point that poetry and literature, like theory and theology, are social realms—necessarily relational spaces that involve power, the formation and splintering of collectivities, and historically weighted contestation on

\(^{42}\) Spivak, AE, 301.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 344. I sense here a warning related to the one Benjamin issues about the ability of law to regard certain lives as justifiably killable (see Chapter 4).

\(^{44}\) Rambo and Jones made similar appeals, as discussed in the first chapter.
politically uneven terrain. As simple as this acknowledgment might seem, it is easy to miss when attempting to understand something like Shoshana Felman’s distinction between judicial and literary languages. She claims that there is something importantly *real*—crucially human and morally pressing—about literary representations of trauma and violence, something that legal forms of understanding cannot approach. As a point about the limits of law, this argument serves to critique liberatory politics that would rely too heavily on policy-based solutions. More may need to be said, however, about both the definition of literary language and modes of literary practice—production, reception, and other forms of dynamic engagement—that could provide valuable contrast with judicial frameworks.

Favoring ‘avant garde’ forms of writing as genuine trauma texts might replicate overgeneralizations about literary writing. The notion that experimental styles purposefully emphasize gaps in consciousness, experience, and understanding, and that this can demonstrate something about what trauma is really like, is an extension of the celebration of literature as that which escapes positivist and rational forms. Stef Craps traces this claim back to Adorno’s favoring of “fragmentation and aporia” as the only aesthetic appropriate to post-Auschwitz reality. He additionally notes that the ways that writer and reader are theorized, when following the footsteps of Felman and Laub, are frequently modeled after the positions of analyst and analysand. The idea that a particular way of doing language will lead dependably to something ethical, even healing, is still a shortcut for thinking how trauma relates to genre.

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47 Ibid., 41-2.
Craps argues for the importance of narrative literature for theorizing trauma in postcolonial contexts as a dual corrective. He attempts, firstly, to reel in what he sees as an elitist tendency to privilege disjointed poetics. His defense of narrative is ultimately, however, one of political exigency: “The reader is addressed here not as an innocent victim but as a bystander or potential collaborator.”48 It is often too risky and inefficient to leave appeals for justice in abstract, ambiguous form. Craps urges that trauma theorists ought to become more “open and attentive to the diverse strategies of representation and resistance” required by postcolonial contexts.49

Craps rejects what can indeed be overly deterministic claims about the superiority of avant garde literary forms. The inadequacy of extolling experimentation is acutely evident with regard to Perloff and Goldsmith. Yet he makes it seem as if literature and its form issue directly from context, from what “these contexts invite or necessitate.”50 This may oversimplify a number of issues pertaining to authorial choice and how authors themselves relate to the contexts they portray. It also leaves uninterrogated the expanse and limits of authorial agency, the extent to which writers can decide what effects they have on readers. As with theory, we might ask what any given piece of literature is trying to do, and what it might actually do, and what to make of the potential distance between those possibilities. There is no automatic or necessary correlation between writing’s form and its degree of ethical accountability.

**Material Writing**

48 Ibid., 42.
49 Ibid., 43.
50 Ibid.
Redemption is what Kapil reports she “didn’t get to”—the part in which “a woman who—Ban-like—contorted [leaped] out of a sacrificial [bridal] fire and is [was] carried out to sea—the Bay of Bengal—on the backs of tiny pink dolphins.” There was the desire for rescue, for healing. Kapil Muni would send out beams of light from his third eye as the woman passed Sagar Island, and this would be at once awakening and dissolution. “I wanted Ban to receive the energy too, simultaneously, here—but would blank out—each time—the section, the time, the body.” What is left is longing, but also a kind of resignation. The location, the materiality of this salvific act is not available. Yet something about the failure to perform this healing-in-writing seems inexplicable, even inhuman. “What kind of person blanks out eternal time? It is okay. Not even in the end parts could I approach this area, the gift, a color healing so radical it extends to a future self—that was not mine.” Who has healing to give? Who will be there to receive the healing that might eventually come?

There is a lot of nudity in the work, and a lot of reflection on “How nudity functions in the work.” There is “Nude Page for Ban” before it is smeared with soot. The “graph of her scissoring limbs [forearms, hands, tongue]” that tries to depict Ban lying on the ground. An unclothed performance made up of gestures formed from the inside a red cloth sack. Undressing and lying down in mud. The “form of nudity” that

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51 Kapil Muni Temple is located on Sagar Island.
52 Kapil, 10.
54 Kapil, 19.
55 Ibid., 20.
56 Ibid., 24.
57 Ibid., 35.
is “the sending of household supplies by freight” across oceans to family members. The harsh telling of the night when “I went home, and my hands were caked in dirt and dew. My skirt was up around my ears. My legs were cold. The insides of my eyes were cold. The bath I took, I couldn’t get it hot enough.” Even “a list of errors I made as a poet engaging a novel-shaped space” has a certain air of baring to it. The attempt to get naked for the sake of Ban, or to get somewhere with or through the naked body, leads to failure of another kind. Kapil realizes after (or perhaps during) the performance in the red sack that

The error of the performance was not that I did these things—but rather—that the discharge of something long held—in the body—does not—affect—or modulate—the resurgence—of a latent—and vehement (British) Far Right. My mistake is that I perform works intended for a European audience—in California—and that I do not have the courage or means to go home.

There are several layers of lament in this passage: that a body’s healing may not be a social healing, that art does not necessarily reach politics, and that she makes the wrong art for her audience (or that she has the wrong audience for her art). Nudity is striving for an intensity of experience, commitment, and connection. It discloses something and ‘discharges’ something. But it is also painful. It somehow (still) manages to be imprecise, to misfire. Would a European audience have known what to do with the body in the red sack? Did the U.S. audience in California have any sense or intimation of their own country’s emerging Far Right?

Despite all of this talk of bodies and experience, Ban is never really there. Ban is not a single person; nor is she composite. She is imagined, but she is also only material,

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58 Ibid., 44
59 Ibid., 34
60 Ibid., 20.
61 Ibid., 24.
“Ban is a mixture of dog shit and bitumen (ash) scraped off the soles of running shoes: Puma, Reebok, Adidas.” She does things—walks, wears clothes, opens her mouth—but as Ban, does not exist. “To be: ‘banned from the city’ and thus: en banlieue: a part of the perimeter. Her life is a “brown (black)” one, an immigrant one. She is “a girl on the floor of the world,” folded in a way that might inevitably look fallen. At the same time, “Ban is a portal, a vortex, a curl: a mixture of clockwise and anti-clockwise movements in the sky above the street.” She transcends, but not in a way that saves.

The syntax of Ban’s lying down is a presumed fallenness. She belongs on the ground, that is, dead. Since she could not have existed in the first place, her lying down seems a confirmation of what already is. It simply makes literal what was already taken as existential fact. Yet what does it mean that she lies down? Is this a mechanical, preprogrammed act, or (also) something else? Lying down could be full surrender, giving oneself up to the social order that forbade existence. It might also be read as a live option, an alternative to being driven to exhaustion by external forces:

…Are you sick and tired of running away?

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62 ibid., 30.
63 The identification of racialized South Asian brownness with blackness in the U.K. during the period of the riot is something with which I am under-familiar, but accounts for the way that language about race appears in this work. This is perhaps a point at which I feel the meaning of being part of a U.S. audience.
64 Kapil, 24.
65 Ibid., 42-3.
66 It is impossible for me to write these words without conjuring images of ‘die-in’ protests performed over the past several years as tactics in movements for Black lives. There has also been telling controversy about whose bodies can effectively stand for Black bodies in such public protests. Can only Black, or perhaps Black and brown, activists effectively draw attention to racialized police violence? Questions about empathy and identification are at play here, the extent to which those who do not share particular experiences ought to share in portraying them. There is also an aesthetic (which is not to say non-political) question about what viewers will perceive, and what might be the political consequences of that perception. Would the appearance of bodies that do not read as Black in such an action dilute that action’s emphasis on violence towards those who are read as Black? This danger seems to me quite real and significant, even as it strong-arms organizers into adopting unsatisfactory frameworks of race and identity.
Then lie down.

Invert yourself above a ditch or stream beneath a bright blue sky.

Then pull yourself up from your knees to clean.67

For one whose exclusion leads to her being hunted, or whose response to not resisting is a frantic search for another place or space of affirmation, lying down could be an assertion of something like a self. Refusing to let the social order keep one on the run, one could also decide against a coerced state of perpetual fighting. If lying down is not hopeful, it may be something more than submission-- an attunement to world and body that does enable a kind of decision. If lying down looks like falling, that says more about the observer’s assumptions than the one on the ground. Yet folding oneself into a (or the) syntactical position is not an immediately legible form of resistance.

It is the lying down, not what the observer assumes has happened, that Kapil most wants to write about. “I wanted to write a book that was like lying down.”68 For the reader or the writer? It is unclear at many points what Kapil is asking the reader to experience and what she is narrating as happening to the body that wrote this book—what she did so that you don’t have to. “I want to lie down in the place I am from: on the street I am from.”69 There is, moreover, the sense that this rehearsing and repeating of lying down is in order to do something that is not ‘just’ to write a novel: What is written can “Emit light. Perceptible to the ones who also. Lie down on the ground. Lie down on the ground like that.”70

67 Kapil, 28.
68 Ibid., 42.
69 Ibid., 31.
70 Ibid., 62.
Writing Ban is a return, a willed engagement with personal history in the context of sociopolitical history. Identifying with Ban while trying to create Ban—trying to materialize Ban through the author’s own actions—is a process that wears on the author. “It is so excruciating to write about these subjects that I take years, months: to write them.” While the material violence suggested and portrayed is (sometimes) directed at Ban, the author’s suffering is closer in proximity to the reader insofar as the reader and writer can be thought to inhabit the same world.

*Interlude: Dead Tongues*

*Ban* begins with its narrator (author) returning, by chance or as if by chance, to Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*, “a book I had not read for many years.” It is the sense of Cha’s presence that urges Kapil on, that makes the ‘failed’ project something that can become or arrive. “I felt her licking me. The inside of my arm, the inside of my ear. My error. I wake up. It’s time for the auto-sacrifice to begin.”

The epigraph to *DICTEE* is presented as a quote from Sappho but is actually written by Cha. Cha has the reader imagine that the English words must have been Greek. As if to say, “she might have said”—Sappho could very well, Cha suggests, have written:

> “May I write words more naked than flesh,  
> Stronger than bone, more resilient than  
> Sinew, sensitive than nerve.”

Cha opens her fragmentary, mixed media book with a quotation fictionally attributed to a poet whose work was mostly destroyed, left in fragments. In this projected voice, the poet exhorts a dense combination of perdurance and exposure—naked and sensitive, strong

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71 Ibid., 77.  
72 Ibid., 7.  
and resilient. Words must not merely become flesh; they must be more bodily than bodies themselves, exceeding in intensity the qualities belonging to what in the body connects, senses, supports, encases. Pseudo-Sappho longs for words that would hold, heal, react, and respond.

Even earlier in the book, across from the title page, is a photographic negative that fuzzily conveys a message carved into a tunnel in Korea. This frontispiece, the only Korean writing the book contains, can be translated, “Mother. I miss you. I am hungry. I want to go home.” The photographed words are written on the wall of a tunnel dug by Koreans to shelter the Japanese during World War II. The carving’s date, and therefore authorship, is debated: Was it written by a coerced laborer or a later Korean nationalist? This ambiguity problematizes the history and origin of the plea, which is itself calling for maternal and domestic origins. While readers have translated the inscription and researched its potential source and meaning, *Dictee* presents the words untranslated and unexplained.74

Cha’s dual opening to her book thus involves words that raise questions of authenticity and origin, of what it would mean to prove or disprove the source of a textual utterance, or to link origins to meaning. Like Kapil’s, Cha’s book contains many traceable autobiographical aspects.75 Yet its sources are so eclectic, and the narrating

74 Thy Phu, “Decapitated Forms: Cha’s Visual Text and the Politics of Visibility,” *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 38, no. 1 (Mar. 2005): 17-37. I would point out the vast difference between this kind of non-engaged, non-translated inscription and the photos and Chinese writing that Agamben neglects to cite or discuss in “Nudity” (Chapter Four).
75 Yet it is also the case that how much, and what specifically, in *Dictee* is factually drawn from Cha’s own life is a recurring—and recurringly frustrating—puzzle for many readers. This has been especially true for those attempting to read Cha in relation to Korean American and Asian American identitarian discourses. See Elaine H. Kim and Norma Alarcón, eds., *Writing Self, Writing Nation* (Berkeley, CA: Third Woman Press, 1994); and Hyo K. Kim, “Embodying the In-Between: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*,” in *Mosaic* 46, no. 4 (2013): 127-143.
voices so dislocated and dispersed in time and space, that it cannot be thought of as a single story about a single person.

Stopping, Going On

On December 16, 2012 Jyoti Singh Pandey was gang raped on a Dehli bus while returning home after seeing The Life of Pi. It is not that the real bursting in on fiction puts fiction to shame, but that attempts to achieve some sense of coherence through art—to tell a story about “a girl on the floor of the world”—are themselves unbearable. “And there I lay down on the ground.” Any clean sense of purpose dissolves, “when the project fell away and all I was left with were the materials themselves.” This is a moment of danger for the writer who intended to be an agent of healing, because it becomes clear that “what the materials wanted was to be crushed and to be returned to the earth and ultimately to be set on fire… but I knew that if I did this, if I continued to write—like this—then I myself—would not be able—to return.” This depiction of the artist whose ability to remain intact is threatened by her ‘materials’ contrasts drastically with the idea of artistic play as a sublime suspension of rationality that delivers subjects as renewed contributors to culture and the state.

There is an insistence that innocence and stability do not characterize Ban: “Let me tell you before you extend yourself that Ban is disgusting. Let me tell you that Ban is a difficult person to love, full of transience.” Ban is full of transience, and this fact

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76 Jyoti Singh Pandey passed away December 29th, 2012 as a result of injuries from the attack.  
77 Kapil, 25.  
78 Ibid.  
79 Ibid., 25.  
80 Ibid., 53.
collides in a cataclysmic way with transience in ‘real life.’ “I thought about those 40 minutes [that Jyoti Singh Pandey lay on the ground] and compared them to the fictive—12 hours—that Ban lay on the ground. What was in the work—as an image—had appeared beyond it—as a scene. …At that moment, I stopped writing Ban.”

What has been gathered for the book has taken on its own life, “what the materials wanted was to be crushed and to be returned to the earth and ultimately to be set on fire.” Yet something about the relationship between the text and its author, something about where the materials had decided they were headed, raised a need for distance. The materials had taken on direction and desire in a way that directly threatened the author: “but I knew that if I did this, if I continued to write—like this—then I myself—would not be able—to return.”

To merge with the contents of this work, a story of racial and sexual violence, presents a danger that is real. Its consequences would involve the author’s irreversible undoing, and the work stops where the writer must.

Except that it continues. Ban is published three years later, albeit in non-novelistic form. Ban is seemingly dropped and abandoned, but the decision to give up on writing a novel is also in her defense: “To abandon is to write prose.”

The work of art that issues

81 Ibid., 25.
82 Ibid., 25.
83 It feels important to note that Cha was murdered at 31 by a serial rapist who worked as a security guard in the same building as her husband (she was recently married). While it is impossible to omit this fact in the present context, it feels impossible to assign it any precise—or even provisional—meaning. Sexual assault and murder by strangers are both random and not, utterly impersonal and also the ‘syntax’ of identifiable social arrangements. Susan Brison’s Aftermath makes related observations and arguments [Susan Brison, Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002)]. This is, perhaps symptomatically, where my own ability to self-consciously track the associations undergirding my own textual performance hits a wall. In the draft of this chapter that my committee read for my dissertation defense, this footnote trailed off with the sentence fragment “Cha had recently”--. I abruptly stopped writing this chapter when a protestor against a white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia was killed by a car that surged into the counter-protesting crowd.
84 Kapil, 41.
from the author/narrator’s efforts does not follow the original, novelistic plan. At the same time, something comes into being: “What did Ban do that outweighed art? What kind of art did she produce?” The interruption after which Ban can no longer be written is always the same story, but it recurs several times in Ban such that it does not divide cleanly into a linear before and after. There is nothing decidedly before, and although the work is always ‘after,’ the break keeps happening.

There is no such thing as the excluded life, and yet one knows where to find it. The life that does not register as one is nonetheless named, and it is called by its failure to be recognized. It is not that unrecognized lives are actually undetectable; rather, categories of lives that do not count are actively created, accepted, and adopted. Even if one cannot see Ban, one cannot now unsee the conditions of Ban’s unseenness. Perhaps unseen lives, those whose being unseen is repeated even in theories of trauma and bare life, require language that does not fix itself into a successful theory or narrative, but remains in process.

**Conclusion: Under Respiration**

But what isn’t medicine and poison if you are teaching use rather than doing good, epistemological involvement rather than material succor? The problem here is one of indeterminacy, because violence is part of desire, pleasure, education, but acknowledgment of violence distorts the mechanism unless framed—and in the matter of feminism this is where the intuition of the transcendental comes in.  

I wanted to write a novel but instead I wrote this. [Hold up charcoal in fist.] I wrote the organ sweets—the bread-rich parts of the body before it’s opened then devoured. I wrote the middle of the body to its end.

...A step forward from back. Backing

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85 Ibid., 35.
87 Kapil, *Ban en Banlieu*, 19; brackets original.
out. Backing off. Off periphery extended. From imaginary to bordering on division. At least somewhere in numerals in relation to the equator, at least all the maps have them at least walls are built between them at least the militia uniforms and guns are in abeyance of them. Imaginary borders. Un imaginable boundaries.\textsuperscript{88}

I have argued that, even as texts like Herman’s, Caruth’s, and Agamben’s are read as originating certain modes of speaking and writing about trauma, it is important not to see their work as arising spontaneously from an absence of discourse. That one can locate the outlines of a theological fall, something like original sin, across multiple accounts of extremity and suffering, does not prove that they are correct or incorrect. The Fall as a persistently useful allegory for humanly structured violence does not have to be confirmed or refuted in this critique. Yet the Fall’s unthematized recurrence across discourses suggests that it is operating as an ideological suture at sites of disjointedness in theory and interpretation.

Surely there is something that all human beings, and perhaps also beings beyond humans, have in common. That whatever it is might lend a foundational moral principle, or that we could develop ethical attitudes and practices that make this fact a consistent guide for ethics, is a dream frequently misattributed to the western European Enlightenment. To seek, as poet Juliana Spahr has put it, \textit{this connection of everyone with lungs}\textsuperscript{89} would be something quite different, and would require the undoing of cultural and

\textsuperscript{88} Cha, \textit{Dictee}, 87.
\textsuperscript{89} Juliana Spahr, \textit{this connection of everyone with lungs: Poems} (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005). Fred Moten refers to the search for “a commonness in how we breathe that would correspond to a commonness in that we breathe.” He calls this “under-respirational aspiration…an essential object of desire and criticism” (“On Marjorie Perloff”).
civilizational hierarchies that the Enlightenment project constructs, rationalizes, and upholds.

Kapil fixates at moments on intestines, which is both about Nirbhaya (Pandey) and about an intimate, shared physicality. The intestines are organs undeniably belonging to the human life from which they come, which also clear evidence of animality—of bearing organs as a sign of animal life. To be exposed to death is also to be similar to beings other than humans, even as it is a fundamental aspect of humanity. The ban in Agamben renders subjects both human and not, in some sense non-existent but sometimes, suddenly visible.

The Fall is not an origin for trauma theory, at least not a pure one. Its invocation is more helpfully framed as a performative citation, deriving and lending credibility to the theories that invoke it because it resonates with readers’ sense of how the world works. Like other performative actions, its operation frequently covers over the lack of origin, seeming to express an underlying truth or essence. It is faith in the performative’s imagined referent of fallenness that I have attempted to erode by returning to Herman and Caruth’s texts, which are foundational for what is today considered trauma studies. It would seem, because of its repetition, that the Fall or original sin must be at the root of traumatic violence and suffering.

Yet even if one accepts this as true (that evil and sin are the result of an original falling away from God), the way that the Fall is positioned in trauma theory is ethically—

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90 Jyoti Singh Pandey’s intestines were reported as being 95% non-functional during her hospitalization after the attack.
91 While I am (performatively) relying on resonances with many thinkers from J.L. Austin to Derrida, this notion that the performative cumulatively constitutes a sense of there being a core or foundational truth behind the performance is coming most directly from Judith Butler. See Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990, 1999, [2006]).
and theologically—problematic. The fallen one is the one who is violated and harmed. It is her humanity that is degraded and thrown into permanent question. In Caruth’s work, harmful acts and decisions are the taken for granted backdrop, which sidelines examinations of power and complicity. Agamben’s *nuda vita* is tied to a more traditionally theological reading of the Fall, demonstrating that the pattern in play does not belong only to the term trauma but to conceptions of extremity more broadly. These observations trigger skepticism, not about the reality of trauma or violence, but about what theories that take on the structure of the Fall are supposed to explain.

The point of this dissertation is not that a theological orientation keeps us stuck in outmoded thinking. The discrepancies between each deployment of fallenness show by contrast its underappreciated mobility, its constant mutation to suit multiple genres, terms, logics, and concerns. Fallenness cannot be taken as a “unifying principle,” but must instead be understood to mark a site of intellectual—and intuitive—suture performed newly and differently in each case. When subjects aligned with trauma additionally belong to oppressed and devalued categories of persons, as Wynter argues with regard to race, they are presupposed as fallen. Then new violence or violation may barely register as such. For those who begin in ostensibly ‘whole’ circumstances, the

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92 This framing is inspired by the structure of Lisa Lowe’s main argument in *Critical Terrains*. She demonstrates through a literary critical lens that orientalism is “heterogeneous and contradictory,” not a metanarrative or master concept that can be overlaid as explanation for statements or events. This is an argument not only for sharpening historical and cultural analysis, but for multiplying the modes and sites of possible contestation. As in theories of trauma, there is a spectrum of complex investments in identifying what is a real encounter with difference or Otherness, what a delusory fantasy generated by one’s own desire or through the circulation of stereotypes, tropes, and misunderstandings. Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 5, 7.

93 While this is perhaps the key claim of my dissertation, I would pause and ask to whom lives and violence are not registering. This is not, or not only, to acknowledge the ways in which communities, counter-publics, and intimate relationships (sometimes) manage to transcend structural non-recognition. External hierarchies are too often recreated internally in all of these
loss of a security that was based from the start in structures of privilege is equated with a removal of grace.

If a structural account of oppression can provide helpful correctives to theories of trauma that focus disproportionately on individuals and events, at the same time, Kapil’s 
Ban is a work in which a single event disrupts its author/narrator’s attempt to tell a story that would situate individual experience in its systemic web. There is no simple course correction that can guarantee justice with a focus on either the individual or a larger social-historical context.

What would it mean to empathize from a position of relative safety and privilege with those who are given up (on) by society? Is such a thing truly possible or desirable? Does identification, as problematic as it can be,\(^4\) play a necessary part in the development of empathy? Can encounters with literary characters’ vulnerability generate reflection on one’s own that do not subsume or erase otherness? I see these questions as the unfinished work of the desires cultivated in and with Caruth’s theoretical texts.

Caruth’s version of theory is fallen in two respects: It is unable to escape bodies and materiality, always bearing traces of mortality in even its most graceful performances. It is also always inadequate to materiality, fallen because it can never fully do justice to the world and its events, to humans and their needs. This is the fallenness of witnessing.

\(^4\) Dominick La Capra’s warnings about the political and ethical danger of conflating empathy and identification were discussed in Chapter Three.
This dissertation calls for a loss of faith in trauma as that which can bring “the world universality to come.” It does not doubt trauma’s reality or the importance of understanding its effects. It is only that trauma, as a concept founded and constantly reinterpreted from its origins in the stories of Holocaust survivors, or the train wreck, or hysteria, is instrumental rather than teleological. It has been, and will continue to be, a tool for tracking and directing attention to particular political, ethical, and clinical domains. Human beings direct ‘trauma’ (the concept), not the other way around, which is why I repeatedly and insistently emphasize linguistic performativity in relation to trauma theory.

Trauma is a term that has gathered power and legitimacy, and is thus a tool that can be used well or poorly in efforts for justice. It is a matter of strategically mobilizing certain uses of the term to recognize harm, protest conditions that enable violence, or build understanding around the complexities of mourning and healing. Trauma itself cannot determine justice or show us how it is to be attained. This conclusion is related to what I read as Caruth’s urging to reflect on how we engage with theory in general. As an adaptive process of questioning that experiments with modes of giving account, theory about trauma and its interlocking issues has instigated important examinations of justice and vulnerability, and the extent to which either of these things is best understood with recourse to human universals. The problem I have laid out in this dissertation is that even in Caruth’s own theoretical practice, trauma and the Fall seem to incline writers toward descriptive rather than questioning postures, making recourse to human universals when there would be reasons to question whether it is the same thing happening across...

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disparate contexts and subject positions. This pattern tends in turn toward teleological thinking that prematurely closes down inquiries into context and meaning.

In assessing, engaging with, and even writing trauma theory, I would urge robust questioning about the relationship of text to life that does not devolve into judging scholars’ sincerity or ‘true’ motives.\(^{96}\) Thoroughly contextualizing personal trauma within its larger world of people, institutions, systems, and histories is the only way that I know to identify which practices have the chance of doing such a thing. This involves a good deal of political and historical analysis, which is not always a familiar domain for trauma scholars, clinical or literary. Or perhaps this is not quite right. Perhaps knowing how to write about trauma is really about knowing when to stop, knowing when one is too close to a performance that would spiral out of control in its (multiply defined) complicity.

How can we be methodologically responsive to the ways that theory can work against the intentions with which we engage it? What do we do with the fact that trauma and the Fall overdetermine which phenomena are recognizable as harmful, and how do we rethink ideas about suffering in light of these limitations? This is where I see aesthetic engagement playing an important role.

As trauma’s association with the Fall implicitly references a whole history of theological thinking that aligns bodies themselves with sin, there is the persistent chance

\(^{96}\) This is not to say that motives need be, or could be, entirely shut out of theoretical and ethical discourse. Reflections, even judgments, about motives are at least suggested in my own reading of Agamben. I find it relevant, though not in an entirely straightforward way, that de Man both had and hid a collaborationist past. Kapil affects how I read or reread Agamben, but does not thereby lessen my discomforts with several of his theoretical moves. Patience with problematic texts is also, in my view, not about doing justice to the author. It is not that a reader owes any theory close reading. Perhaps theory can operate like fiction in the sense that what one feels, thinks, and experiences with the text as well as against it is part of how one goes about forming modes and methods for perceiving and relating in the rest of life.
that fixing attention on bodies will miss the ethical mark. This seems to be a worry that torments Kapil in her attempts to represent traumatic events and their lasting effects. Yet attention to bodies, their vulnerabilities and legibilities and differences, remains ethically necessary. This opening—a moment or crossroads which can always go multiple ways—is a risk that I think must be taken.

Departing from an ongoing debate about genre, one with which Stef Craps has also lost patience but for divergent reasons, the question is not what kind of literature matters in studying trauma, but what practices of engaging literature might provide opportunities to rework sensibilities and analytical frameworks. For Kapil, questions of interpretation—the practices that one undertakes as a reader and writer—are intertwined with questions about how one endures or witnesses to suffering.

I would, then, advocate an agnostic approach to the possibility of leveraging trauma theory for justice that could be viewed as either fundamental indecision about divine guarantees or a narrower concern about idolatry. Spivak writes, “here I announce a hopelessness, because life and hope are too easily claimed by the camp of mere reason.” And here I would put forward a loss of faith in trauma as a concept that can reliably detect harm and realize justice. To work with both of these losses is an aesthetic project, and requires work on affect and sensibility as much as logic.

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97 Spivak, AE, 33.
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