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The American Cult of the Experience and the Real/Psychosocial Split
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As Fred Alford has convincingly argued (this issue), myriad social, political, and cultural forces have obstructed the establishment of a robust field of psychosocial studies in America. Such forces include the inhospitable historical context in which the work of prominent psychosocial scholars might have otherwise come to the fore, the well-known pragmatic leanings of American philosophy, positivism in the natural sciences and scientism in social and behavioral sciences, the physicalization and medicalization of suffering, the full (if not excessive) embrace of the body and affect as appropriate loci of research in clinical psychology, the entrenchment of a mind/body split, and more.

In this paper, I offer a cultural-historical-intellectual background to the American landscape and its relative infertility for psychosocial study, with particular reference to the influence of what I have called elsewhere the 'ideologies of experience' (Bowker 2016). The ideology of experience entrenched in the United States is one that locates supreme cultural and moral authority and value in 'experience,' valorizing experience in a way that makes it unamenable to mentation, reflection, and communication. This ideology, to be sure, has roots both within and outside of American traditions, but it has, nevertheless, profoundly impacted the development of virtually all American academic disciplines that attend to psychological, political, and social phenomena.

To explore the influence of the ideology of experience on the development (or lack thereof) of an organized field of psychosocial study, I emphasize the *split* between the psychosocial and the real in American thought. This split is closely related to the mind/body split mentioned above and discussed in some detail by Alford (this issue) and elsewhere. Of course, when the body is privileged, the split remains in force (or returns to force), although the epistemic and moral values attached to each are inverted with respect to their Cartesian origins. Indeed, the split between the psychic and the social extends but alters the individual mind / body split, such that the psyche is equated with the social, with suspect cultural constructions, and with malign (externalized) political powers; the body with 'things-in-themselves,' with reality, and with the individual. Indeed, on this score, the body becomes the individual's most reliable connection to reality—as Bessel van der Kolk would say (2015), the 'score' (but perhaps not the 'story') is kept within its very organs, bones, and tissues—and so becomes the individual's most prized possession.

If, to the American individual, only the body can be relied upon to contain the individual's reality, we might (more reasonably) construe the connections—or the container of the connections—between body and mind to define, or at least point us

toward, 'the self.' The history of the concept of 'self' in America is a complex one, and, unfortunately, beyond the scope of the present paper, yet it suffices to say that, even when the American self appears to be championed, as in the groundbreaking American poetry of Walt Whitman or in the powerful essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson, beneath this celebration lies a conviction that the self, *without experience*, shall be unmoored and soon overrun by illusion arising from the mind and from social influence, thus impinging on the individual truth, if not his or her very individuality.

Lately, a host or preeminent American ethical theorists have accepted this premise while introducing the suggestion that the self ought to remain unmoored and overrun by enmeshment with others (see Bowker 2016). Judith Butler, for instance, has argued that our selves must be 'gripped and undone' by our experience … 'in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves as autonomous and in control.' Our experience must 'clutter [our] speech with signs of its undoing,' must leave us 'throbbing' and 'disrupted,' attuned to those experiences that make attempts at self-awareness and self-narration absurd (2004, 23, see also Bowker 2014, 64-65).

If we are inextricably bound up with others, claims Butler, then the very idea of narrative self becomes ludicrous, as, she inveighs, it must. Better to have a self so shattered that it cannot speak—i.e., lie—to itself or others, than to risk a 'self-centered' subjectivity that neglects interdependence, vulnerability, and the 'precarious life' they instill. This precarity—our enthrallment to others (or to the Other)—is held up by many psychoanalytically-inclined American theorists as the sole remaining foundation of 'a good society,' bound together not by shared values or democratic practice so much as by a shared 'point of identification with suffering itself' (Butler 2004, 30).

Of course, this shared 'point of identification with suffering' is located within the body, the bodies of the vulnerable, the bodies of the victimized, the bodies of the traumatized. In this way, experience, itself — that almost unfathomably vast concept — has been reduced to a rather small sub-section of experience in much contemporary American thought: traumatic experience, or, that sort of experience that acts on and resides in the body, seemingly evading mediation by the self and the mind. And we are encouraged to find our own sites of bodily harm, vulnerability, and trauma so as to connect with others'.

While it is true that some political and ethical theorists have valorized this sort of traumatic connection more than others, the fundamental assumption that the body is *closer* to the individual than the mind and self — i.e., to a greater degree in his or her *possession* — has remained virtually unchallenged. Consider, for instance, the words of prominent political theorist William Connolly, who claims not only that 'the body is more layered, rich, and creative than the soul' (2002, 85), but that that what is most important is to respect 'the claims of [our] bod[ies] to [their] own truths' (see Alford, this issue).[1]

Experience, then, is seductive when construed as an immediate link between body and reality, as against links between individual bodies and the social body or

'body politic.' It becomes amenable to, if not suggestive of, physical/bodily orientations toward life, to the kind of individualism for which American is known, and to ideals of ownership and possession, which, at the risk of over-generalizing, Americans have, on balance, historically embraced. Now, ironically if not tragically, the desire to 'possess our own individual experience' has come to mean that the psyche and the self must be set aside as dubious entities apt to re-double oppressive narratives established by amorphous and overpowering 'dark forces' wielding political power.

Social scientific disciplines have, of late, fallen back on demiurgic conceptions of political and social power, such that opaque 'forces,' such as 'the establishment,' 'the patriarchy,' 'the government,' 'the privileged,' 'the structure,' and 'the system,' referenced in phrases like 'structural racism,' or 'systematic victimization.' At the same time, psychology has made little progress (if not regress) in challenging the fantasy of a bright line between sanity and insanity, normality and abnormality, clinical 'safety' and 'danger.' Put another way, the split between the psychological and the social in America seems designed to protect what is considered to be most important in individuals from invasion and corruption by outside forces. If we recall the earliest (medical) definition of trauma as that of a foreign object penetrating the boundary of the body, this split seems very much a *traumatic* orientation to life.

The effects of such trends and the prejudices that underwrite them are all-too-apparent in American discourses about, for example, gun violence and (epidemic levels of) mass shootings. Americans, sadly, know the steps to this particular dance: (1) A deadly and violent event occurs; (2) Elected officials from the Right, the Center, and sometimes the Left announce that it would be unseemly to debate gun-restrictions in the wake of such tragedy (in favor of offering 'thoughts and prayers' to the victims and their families); and (3) finally, a 'mad' rush ensues to classify the perpetrator as 'mentally ill.'

On this final step, some go as far as to say, in something of a tautology, that anyone who commits a mass shooting is, *eo ipso*, mentally ill ('because what *sane* person could do *that*?'). Thus, it can always be concluded that *individual* metal health issues, and not psychosocial or psychopolitical factors, are responsible. In both cases, of course, it does not take a finely tuned psychoanalytic ear to hear in all this a good deal of scapegoating, a reliance on illogic, a deliberate or unwitting ignorance of history, and a deployment a rigid defense-system seemingly designed to protect Americans — or, perhaps, the 'American people' — from involvement in atrocity.

Psychoanalysis, socioanalysis, and psychosocial analysis appear to many Americans as those schools of thought that would disable such defenses, so that, in the case of mass murder and terrorism, our identifications with the (innocent) bodies of victims—who are frequently but not exclusively children—might be called into questioned. Likewise, insistences that we are 'sane' and are therefore categorically different from 'insane' perpetrators—i.e., our bodies are 'sane,' free from the neurological problems that have come to define mental illness in America—might be contradicted by psychosocial theses that suggest that between sanity and insanity lives

not a bright line but a continuum, that neither live exclusively, or even predominantly, inside the body alone but, rather, within the psyche-soma, and that even 'ordinary' persons are perfectly capable of committing egregious acts of violence given certain cultural, social, economic, and political conditions (see e.g., Browning 1998).

Against psychosocial interpretation and analysis, then, stands the ideology of experience *à l'américaine*. In the remainder of this brief essay — brief, at least, relative to the scope of its subject — I pull at certain threads of this American intellectual-cultural heritage to offer a way to understand the valorization of experience that entrenches the split between the psychic/social, on one hand, and the body/real, on the other. This split, of course, strongly mitigates against — if it does not altogether preclude — the development of robust intellectual and cultural investment in the field of psychosocial study.

The Authority of Experience

The ascendency of 'experience' as a (or *the*) cultural and moral authority in America involves a dauntingly complex history. It surely has to do with the American rejection of both the Roman Catholic Church and the Monarchic State, but it is far less simple than that. It would be beyond the scope of the present work to delve deeply into this history, and, even if space limitations did not apply, there are works and thinkers that explore it more thoroughly and exhaustively than I could (see e.g., Jay 2005; Lundin 2005).

The English antipsychiatrist, David Smail, is right, and likely even understates the case, when he notes that 'there is something about the lessons they draw from their experience of life which human beings are reluctant — indeed, often almost unable — to abandon' (1984, 93). The real question, of course, is why this is so. Celebrants of experience argue that experience is our sole *antidote* to fantasy, myth, and ideology, making the matter of elucidating and critiquing 'ideologies *of* experience' rather complicated. What they mean is that the reality accessible by experience is valuable precisely *because* it cannot be thought, cannot be held by language, cannot be communicated as an idea, and, so, cannot be interfered with by the self or others. Experience, in this way, is regarded as both incommensurate with and superior to the self. Of course, the notion of an idea-proof, thought-proof, self-proof experience is, itself, fantastic, mythical, and ideological: At its core, ideologies of experience are fantasies, myths, and ideologies of the *in-itself-ness* of experience.

The term 'experience' has no suitable synonym in any language of which I am aware, and retains the quality of a 'slippery signifier,' capable of referring to almost anything. An adequate illustration of both the slipperiness of the concept and the necessity of an approach to experience that pins down its relationship to the individual and to the self comes from an excerpt of (the English philosopher and mathematician) Alfred North Whitehead's defense of his event- and process-oriented philosophy. Whitehead argues:

> In order to discover some of the major categories under which we can classify the infinitely various components of experience, we must appeal to evidence relating to every variety of occasion … experience drunk and experience sober, experience sleeping and experience waking, experience drowsy and experience wide-awake, experience self-conscious and experience self-forgetful, experience intellectual and experience physical, experience religious and experience sceptical, experience anxious and experience care-free, experience anticipatory and experience retrospective, experience happy and experience grieving, experience dominated by emotion and experience under self-restraint, experience in the light and experience in the dark, experience normal and experience abnormal. (1933, 226)

Of course, the irony of Whitehead's attempt to describe the manifold components of experience is that with each new mode, with each item on his list, we find ourselves increasingly perplexed about what 'experience' could possibly denote. In the end, it seems an unnecessary word, or, alternatively, a super-word, capable of signifying a temporary condition ('drunk'), a mode of being ('physical'), an attitude ('skeptical'), a psychological state ('grieving'), a circumstantial environmental condition ('in the dark'), a moral or ethical self-relation ('under self-restraint'), and a relation to a group ('abnormal'). Perhaps the only way to make sense of Whitehead's usage is to imagine that experiencers hold these varieties of experience together, making them into something more than chaos. But that is not Whitehead's point. It is, in large part, *my* point, as ideologies of experience routinely eclipse a subjective *experiencer*—a self—in favor of a less capable, less integrated 'experienced body,' wedded in more primitive ways to its experiences and to experiences' objects.

If Martin Luther was able to challenge a millennium of Church authority by claiming that 'experience alone makes a theologian' (quoted in Gerrish 1993, 186), it is curious that the experience he defended would so quickly come to resemble the mysterious and overpowering Church he opposed. American mystic Andrew Jackson Davis offers an illustrative example. Davis contends that thought

> bears the same relation to the Real Truth … that a dream sustains to the substantial events of wakeful experience, for when the hour of real prayer comes over the throbbing soul … inexorable experience steps in, prescribes its own remedies, its own penalties; and becomes, at last, the only "divinity school" from which the mind can derive its imperishable education. (1869, 33)

For Davis, 'inexorable' experience is the only 'divinity school' capable of saving our 'throbbing soul[s]' by prescribing '*its own* remedies … [and] penalties' upon us; if, that is, we are desperate enough to offer ourselves up in '*real* prayer.' The 'imperishable education' tendered by experience is quite often, as we shall see, a lesson in the necessity of submitting fully to the traumas inflicted by experience's objects, traumas deemed necessary and good.

Without being naïve about it, we might imagine that our experience, even or especially our experience(s) of the sacred, ought to make us feel alive, at home, and whole. But such feelings are quite at odds with the 'numinous dread,' 'awefulness,' and

quality of *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (overwhelming and fascinating mystery before which we tremble) that have continued to demarcate 'sacred' experience from experience banal and the ordinary (Otto 1992, 78-85). Thus, in his book on *The Throe of Wonder*, Jerome Miller writes of the foolishness of removing ourselves from crisis, horror, and death. Miller recommends, instead, 'allow[ing] the experience of horror, and specifically horror in the face of death, to shatter the accepted understanding of ourselves both as selves and as philosophers' (1992, 124).

The American scholar Randy Pausch's best-selling book and widely broadcast talk entitled, *The Last Lecture: Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams* derived much of its popularity by echoing the widespread belief in the value of traumatic and agonizing experience, along with the value of failing to resist or overcome it. Pausch, a beloved computer science professor suffering from terminal pancreatic cancer, concluded: 'Experience is what you get when you didn't get what you wanted. And experience is often the most valuable thing you have to offer' (2008, 157).

While experiences do form special and valuable parts of human lives, it is worth questioning why the most venerated experiences seem, of late, to be those in which the psyche, and its connection with others — 'the social,' for lack of a better term — are incapacitated or lost. Celebrated are those experiences in which the experienced body finds, instead, an unthinkable, agonizing, and fascinating (*tremendum et fascinans*) connection with an overwhelming object. If we are asked to cherish such connections and even to seek out, repeat, and master such experiences, then, contrary to their stated aims, dedication to experience of this sort radically delimits the range and depth of experience available to human beings.

Tocqueville and Individuality in America

Experience rose quickly to the status of cultural and intellectual authority in America (and has remained there) in part because it accords with American idealizations of freedom and individuality. About the former, the celebrated American historian Eric Foner reminds us that 'no idea is more fundamental to Americans' sense of themselves as individuals and as a nation than freedom' (1998, xiii). And of the latter, Alexis de Tocqueville (2000) famously lamented — indeed, he considered the American 'individual' a lamentable creature — argued that American 'individuals' were minimal, withdrawn, and alienated from themselves and others, from their own history and from their collective future. American society 'make[s] each man forget his ancestors,' Tocqueville writes, 'hides his descendants from him and separates him from his contemporaries; it constantly leads him back toward himself alone and threatens finally to confine him wholly in the solitude of his own heart' (2000, 484).

Perhaps more to the point, the fantasy of the autonomous, self-reliant, American individual is, for Tocqueville, a dangerous farce, since although Americans' mental energies are regularly returned to their own petty and private concerns, Americans are simultaneously enthralled to the will of the people (the tyranny of the majority). It is a condition in which individualism and mass democracy reinforce popular opinion and majority rule not only in civic matters but in all areas of life. American devotion to *practical* experience, furthermore, endowed experience with a nearly divine authority in

American philosophies and pedagogies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see Bowker 2016; Dewey 1929; 1960; 1997; Lundin 2005, 163-65). Thus, 'good' acts and 'good' individuals are those that are aligned with the opinion of the people, not because the majority forces them to be so, but because individuals are unwitting conformists

> like travelers dispersed in a great forest in which all the paths end at the same point. If all perceive the central point at once and direct their steps in this direction, they are insensibly brought nearer to one another without seeking each other, without perceiving and without knowing each other, and they will finally be surprised to see themselves gathered in the same place. (Tocqueville 2000, 588)

The dangerous consequence of this paradoxically individualistic and conformist thinking, for Tocqueville, could not be overstated. Whereas a king 'has only a material power that acts on actions and cannot reach wills, the majority is vested with a force … that acts on the will as much as on actions, and which at the same time prevents the deed and the desire to do it.' From which Tocqueville concludes, ominously: 'I do not know any country where, in general, less independence of mind and genuine freedom of discussion reign than in America' (2000, 243-244).

The power of the majority, vested in the American ideology of experience, condemns most American individuals to unwitting conformism, chronic agitation, and the compulsive pursuit of social status and material wealth: busy yet trivial existences in which selfhood and both solitude and profound relating could find no place. As American culture seemed to lose its capacity to facilitate being alone and relating to (and not just identifying with) others, Americans increasingly reverted to the kinds of activities that express *not being* a self, what Winnicott calls 'the doing that arises out of [not] being … a whole life … built on the pattern of reacting to stimuli' (1986, 39).

> There is nothing less fit for meditation than the interior of a democratic society. … Everyone is agitated: some want to attain power, others to take possession of wealth. In the midst of this universal tumult, the repeated collision of contrary interests, the continual advance of men toward fortune, where does one find the calm necessary to the profound combinations of the intellect? (Tocqueville 2000, 434)

Perhaps the most frightening aspect of Tocqueville's thesis is that he does not suggest that Americans are able to recognize much their close relationships to social and cultural power. Quite the opposite: Tocqueville noted well that Americans held to their illusory independence religiously. American individuals, as well as those inhabiting what we now refer to as 'mass cultures,' unknowingly propitiate the will of the mass, while espousing their own boundless independence, thinking others' thoughts but believing them to be their own. Here we can see both the need for, and the historical-cultural sources of resistance to, pursuing psychosocial analyses of American life.

Emerson and the Ingestion of Experience

Of course, the location of authority in individual experience is not an American invention, although it may well be a 'modern' one: It appears clearly in the Protestant Reformation, the European Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, and the early Romantic movement. In the modern era, Francis Bacon would recommend *experientia literata* (learned experiences) as a first 'step to essential knowledge' (Jay 2005, 31), and Michel de Montaigne would claim that 'in the experience I have of myself, I find enough to make me wise' (1993, 354).

Indeed, the great American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay, 'Experience,' recapitulates Montaigne's famous teachings about experience's supreme value, as well as the passive, if not entirely submissive, attitude one ought to hold toward experience: 'If we will take the good we find, asking no questions,' Emerson declares, 'we shall have heaping measures. The great gifts are not got by analysis. Everything good is on the highway' (2009, 315). If, for Montaigne, the human mind was like 'a mouse in pitch,' strangling itself with every move, or like one of Aesop's dogs, trying to drink up the sea to satisfy a morbid curiosity (see Montaigne 1993, 347-348), for the Emerson of 'Experience,' thinking is a kind of suicide: 'If a man should consider the nicety of the passage of a piece of bread down his throat,' Emerson warns, 'he would starve' (313).

Emerson and Montaigne both accuse the mind or psyche of interfering with the unreflective and self-effacing attitude required to im-mediately 'take in' or 'swallow' experience. Our ability to sustain ourselves via experience, then, relies on a minimization of, or even disappearance of, the psyche and the self, in order to give pride of place to experience's object. Emerson urges:

> Do not craze yourself with thinking, but go about your business anywhere. Life is not intellectual or critical, but sturdy. Its chief good is for well-mixed people who can enjoy what they find, without question. Nature hates peeping, and our mothers speak her very sense when they say, 'Children, eat your victuals, and say no more of it.' To fill the hour, — that is happiness; to fill the hour, and leave no crevice for a repentance or an approval. (2009, 314)

In this passage, we might say that it is not precisely that we fill ourselves with experience's object, nor that we simply ingest or take in 'the hour.' Rather, more demandingly, experience's object *must be filled by us*, and, more precisely, *must be filled with our own emptiness*. Here, time or 'the hour' represents experience's object, and 'to fill the hour' means 'to fill' the object by evacuating the mind, the psyche, the self. To fill the object, and then to partake secondarily or vicariously in the object's plenitude, requires that we give ourselves fully to the object, without leaving the slightest 'crevice' for a thought, the most miniscule sliver of doubt for 'a repentance or an approval.'

Thus, for Emerson, the psyche disrupts the process of taking in experience whole, and since experience's object is the 'good' (i.e., the good object), thinking, doubting, 'peeping,' and questioning all represent a kind of *withholding* of the individual from experience. This withholding, in turn, contains the forbidden implicit

suggestion that the individual might possess something of value in him- or herself, something that would make him or her less dependent upon experience's object, something that would make him or her other than empty and worthless absent experience. And since holding something of value within the mind, psyche, or self is abhorrent to the objects of experience that must nourish us completely, we can only appear to ourselves (and to our selves) as 'bad.'

Apparently, the individual's relationship to experience's objects is quite similar to a child's relationship to a narcissistic parent, in which the child receives only unpredictable and transitory experiences of 'the good,' not according to his or her needs or designs, but in passing, at the parent's whim, 'on the highway,' and only if the parent is attended to first and fully. In a way, it is the narcissistic object (i.e., the narcissistic parent or the object of experience) that *feeds* on the emptiness of the individual, in order to affirm its own value by diminishing or repudiating the value of the individual to whom it putatively attends. To be commanded to 'eat your victuals' while being forbidden to speak may be to be physically nourished, but it is to be psychically starved. To accept this starvation as 'the good' that life bestows is, to return to Holm's metaphor, one way 'to swallow our failure.' It is also one way to be traumatized.

Let us push further and say that to advocate for a kind of nourishment that is actually an evacuation of the psyche is to become a *center of trauma* or a 'site of trauma' (Caruth 1995, 11), rather than a 'center of initiative' (Kohut 1977, 99) or site of authentic being and doing, thinking, creating, or relating. The traumatized individual may be said to have been engaged in an experience, event, or relationship that involved the emptying of his or her self and the incorporating, instead, the traumatic experience that has been suffered. Of course, since unthought or unthinkable experience cannot be contained within the psyche, and since the psyche has been devastated by an overwhelming encounter with an object of experience, attempts to 'hold onto' or 'possess' such experience can only be physical and affective, and can only mean repeating and returning to the experience and its object again and again.

This is what well-known American trauma theorist Cathy Caruth means when she suggests that the traumatized carry with them, throughout life, 'the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely *possess*.' At the same time, 'to be traumatized is precisely *to be possessed* by an image or event' (1995, 4-5, *emphases added*). Thus, traumatic experience possesses the traumatized individual by usurping, in a sense, the place of the psyche, leaving nothing but a traumatized body in its wake. But Caruth does not argue, as I would argue, that the *goal* for traumatized individuals should be for the psyche to re-establish itself and rediscover its place. She argues something much nearer to the opposite. Absent the objective of re-establishing the psyche within the individual, repeated moments of traumatic experience, and repeated transmissions of one's possession by trauma, are all that is left to traumatized individuals, and are thereby mistaken, by Caruth, for 'real' connections to history, to others, and to reality.

The Experienced Body Cannot Think, Only Possess (and Be Possessed)

It is not at all uncommon to hear, in an American university classroom, a statement such as the following: 'If you have never experienced what I have experienced, then you can't understand.' This claim is not merely intended to inform the listener about the limits of his or her knowledge. It is meant to admonish the listener for attempting to think about the speaker's experience. When such a statement is made, we may infer that the experience in question involves something central to the speaker's sense of identity. Not coincidentally, it often relates to the speaker's experience of victimization or trauma, past or present (or future).

Here, the listener is urged to stand back and to abandon attempts at thinking, because doing otherwise is perceived as a destabilizing assault on the speaker's inner world, a world where the experience in question has come to play a central role. Curiously, this defiance of communication and relation has been defended as a means of 'self-preservation' for the victimized and traumatized individual. In an essay in which Melville's famously absurd and taciturn character, Bartleby, the Scrivener, is held up as a kind of resistance fighter for the underprivileged, Andrew Schapp (2019) writes: 'In circumstances of structural inequality, withdrawing from privileged subjects' ignorance [e.g., refusing to speak to others or to answer their questions] can be a form of self-preservation.'

While threats to our experience may seem to arise from the world outside, it is really our precarious hold on our experience that is highlighted when we defend it so rigidly. The fear of having one's experience thought or comprehended — 'comprehend' comes from the Latin *com* + *prehendere*, meaning to grasp or seize — by others derives from a confusion (perhaps a form of symbolic equation) in which we imagine that others may seize our experience and destroy it with thought, leaving us with nothing. More likely, we struggle with an internal dilemma in which *our own* thinking is feared to destroy our possession of our experience and its objects, in which we long to be able to hold our experience in our bodies, where no one can see, read, or comprehend them, and in which we fear *our own* thoughts but project these fears outward onto a world perceived to assault us with analysis where, if we and our defining experience are to survive, must remain thoughtless, if not absurd.

Thinking about experience must be avoided if thinking leads to questioning or doubt of experience's necessity, inevitability, and goodness. To question or doubt would be to risk upsetting the bargain whereby the individual replaced his or her own estimations of what was 'good' and 'bad' with the ingestion of injurious and adverse experience. To control the threat posed by thinking about experience, the act of thinking is split off both from the self and from its relationship to its experience. It is projected onto others, particularly onto easy or at least 'suitable targets of externalization' (Volkan 1985), which include knowledge- and expertise-based institutions and groups, which are imagined to be interested in greedily devouring individuals' experience. Of course, the psychic projection of repressed doubts, authentic estimations of experience, and genuine needs and desires often results in exaggerated perceptions of the power and destructiveness of others, institutions, and groups.

If, as I have proposed, the powerful, terrible, yet nebulous agents of our devastation may be understood as external representations of internal motivations to think, and are perceived to be destructive to the experiences we have had and must re-live without thinking, then the alternative to destruction, which is also the alternative to thinking about experience, is the 'hypertrophic development of the apparatus for projective identification' (Bion 1988, 112). As discussed briefly above, fear, badness, anxiety, and the threat posed by thinking must be contended with by turning to an 'evacuative discharge' of internal elements (Grinberg, Sor, and de Bianchedi 1977, 58). Thinking, itself, is specifically avoided in projective discharges because the objects of experience *must* become 'unthinkable,' larger than life, 'indistinguishable from … thing[s]-in-[themselves]' (Bion 1988, 112). For this reason, projects undertaken in the name of experience, protected from thought or rational inspection and addressed to incomprehensibly lived moments, make the world a 'dangerous place to be' (see also Bowker and Levine 2018), as they create conditions averse to the kinds of thinking, relating, and communicating required for the development and sustenance of mature individuals and groups.

If we must work to protect experience from thought so as to swallow and hold onto failure, it would seem that, contrary to its characterization as powerful, solid, and 'sturdy' (Emerson 2009, 314), our relationship to experience is quite tenuous or fragile, something that can be readily dissolved or destroyed. Cognate with *peril*, the word 'experience' refers, etymologically, to a trial, a danger through which one passes. Now it is this perilous passage, itself, that appears to be imperiled. Indeed, if we believe André Malraux, Walter Benjamin, Giorgio Agamben, Theodor Adorno, R.D. Laing, and others, we modern and contemporary citizens have *already* suffered an extraordinary 'impoverish[ment]' of our experience (Benjamin 1999, 735), 'an almost unbelievable devastation of our experience' (Laing 1967, 11).

Consider American poet and essayist Bill Holm's summary of the relationship between experience and power in his book, *The Music of Failure*:

> Sacredness is unveiled through your own experience, and lives in you to the degree that you accept that experience as your teacher, mother, state, church. … One of power's unconscious functions is to rob you of your own experience by saying: we know better, whatever you may have seen or heard. … We are principle, and if experience contradicts us, why then you must be guilty of something. Power — whether church, school, state, or family — usually does this at first in a charming way while feeding you chocolate cake, bread and wine, advanced degrees, tax shelters, grant programs, and a strong national defense. Only when contradicted does it show its true face, and try to kill you. Instead, kill it inside you fast, and do it whatever damage seems practical in the outer world. Next, put your arms around everything that has ever happened to you, and give it an affectionate squeeze. (2010, 15-16)

According to Holm and his intellectual forebears, powerful institutions 'rob' us of our experience, threaten us with the authority of 'principle,' and bribe us to collude in our

own victimization. If these methods fail to loosen our grip on our experience, 'power' shows 'its true face' — one of persecutory violence — and tries 'to kill' us. Therefore, our survival, which here means the survival of our experience, requires that we destroy not primarily those external powerful institutions we imagine to assault us, but their internal psychic representatives: thoughts. It is thought and thinking that we must 'kill inside [us] fast.'

Holm strives to articulate what is 'sacred' about the experience of 'failure' of struggling individuals and communities, praises his own 'immigrant culture that … succeeded at failure' (2010, 96), and imagines a glorious history of failure that, instead of the history told by the victors, would be a more 'real' and 'honest' history of human defeat. Holm argues that, 'since 1945, self-building has become a matter of life and death for the whole planet. We have now reached the point in human history where some cure is absolutely necessary, some embracing of wholesome failure' (100-101).

Holm's fear of 'self-building' and his insistence that the history of the failed is more real than the history of the successful links him to the extensive tradition of anti-subjective contemporary ethical theory. The fear and rejection of the self or subject as dishonest and dangerous has everything to do with the contention, supposedly confirmed in the terrors of the twentieth century, that self-centered subjectivity cannot be maintained as an ideal without also idealizing an unacceptable level of real and symbolic violence.

> There is a certain pleasure that comes from swallowing your own failure. … [H]umor grows out of these indigestible lumps of history. Nothing that is itself can conceivably be termed a failure by the transcendental definition. But things must acknowledge and live up to their selfness. This is fairly effortless for a horse or a cow, more difficult for a human being. … When it happens occasionally, as I argue that it did in the case of the Icelanders, it creates a rare wonder, a community that has eaten its own failures so completely that it has no need to be other than itself. (2010, 100)

So, we must first fail, and then swallow our failures, to become ourselves, where becoming ourselves means becoming our failures. Holm's phrase, 'nothing that is itself can conceivably be termed a failure,' is absolutely inconsistent with his overall argument, which is really, on the contrary, that 'nothing that fails completely can conceivably be termed itself.' To eat or swallow failure, within Holm's logic, means to embrace it, and, although it is 'indigestible,' to attempt to sustain oneself upon it.

To swallow failure is to internalize failure, supplanting other objects and aspects of the inner world. It is to establish failure as a locus of identity, primarily, for Holm, a locus of the *community's* identity, in which all community members partake. When all community members have swallowed their individual and collective failures, then the community 'has no need to be other than itself.' Another way to say this would be: 'The community is the collective result of all members' failed attempts at being selves. The community has no need to be anything other than this, since the community understands

its function *not* to be that of redeeming individuals but, rather, that of assuring members of their place in a community of equally failed selves.'

It is by this investment of value in the idea of failure that we arrive at the curious idea that internalizing self-failure both destroys and returns to us our lost selves.

As in the self hypostatized in Caruth's and others' theories of trauma, the premise of Holm's notion is that the self is necessarily unreal and, in that respect, 'bad.' The self that fails and the self that is lost must have been unreal because they were incapable of containing the unquestionable reality imputed to experience. In other words, on this line of thought, experiences that incapacitate or destroy the self evince the self's unreality. At the same time, the experience of failure binds one to the failures of others and to the community of failed selves that remains in contact with its collective failure as a matter of solidarity or community-identity. While accepting such an attitude toward self-failure is, in its own way, *traumatic*, it represents another piece of the psychic social contract by which a self-destructive attitude toward experience is the price of entry into the reigning moral order

Without conversing directly with the post-structuralist tradition, Holm's argument is not dissimilar to Michel Foucault's well-known concept of 'power/knowledge,' the alignment of normalizing, disciplinary, and technocratic knowledge with political power spread in 'capillary' fashion throughout society (1975; 1980).[1] To kill power/knowledge 'inside [us] fast,' we make a substitution: Any authority originating in institutions such as the 'church, school, state, or family' must be replaced with a consecration of our experience, that is: 'everything that has ever happened to [us].' We must 'put [our] arms around' our experience as our *new* 'teacher, mother, state, church.' Institutions and their authority must be remade not exactly in our own images but in the images of our past and *passive* experiences (i.e., 'everything that has ever happened *to* [us]'). These past and passive experiences become our new 'sacred' objects, if we hope to escape destruction by the 'power' of knowledge.

Many public commemorations of atrocity or disaster, such as the memorial of the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11 and the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., are designed to be interactive, 'living' experiences for visitors, some of whom find them moving, others of whom find them overwhelming and intolerable. Visitors to such memorials are typically encouraged to identify with victimizers while sharing in the experience of the victim (see Levine 2003), an ambivalent and uncomfortable set of demands that generates psychic tension most readily relieved in fantasies of redeeming the victims by

[1] Since many Americans are not only preoccupied with body and affect but are plagued by anxieties of influence, as it were, in their 'own' thoughts and beliefs (explored later in the essay), they would be loath to learn that the stance described here is derived predominantly from the French poststructuralist theorist (what else ought we call him?), Michel Foucault, who argued, memorably: '[It] is always the body that is at issue – the body and its forces, their utility and their docility, their distribution and submission' (1975, 25)

victimizing the victimizers, and all that resembles them, in visitors' inner and outer worlds.

The effort to generate in visitors powerfully ambivalent identifications with both victims and victimizers, along with emotions of shame and rage, is effective in displacing thought while binding visitors to the experience of suffering in question. Such commemorations make thinking about, learning about, and communicating about such events psychically threatening and significantly more difficult, which may imply that the stated purposes of education, reflection, and contemplation which these memorials often advertise as their missions may be at least partly dishonest.

It is no coincidence that the kind of extreme and traumatic experiences with which postmodern cultural, political, and literary theorists have been preoccupied of late have been declared both 'literally' true and inherently 'unknowable' (Caruth 1996, 57-62). Even some of the sagest commentators find themselves surrendering to the imperative to defend experiences, and the roles to which experiences assign us, as sacred things, by protecting them from the reach of thought. If human experiences are, by definition, 'ineffab[le],' 'unformulated,' or 'slippery' (Stern 1997, 35), always leaving an unknowable 'remainder,' then experience becomes an unthinkable 'thing-in-itself.' The combination of the unquestioned 'truth-value of experience' (Gadamer 1989, 357) and the putative 'obscenity' or 'sin' of attempting to intellectually access experience (see Lanzmann 1995, 204; Camus 1955, 49) suggests that many champions of experience have built walls around their most cherished yet also most self- and psyche-destructive experience, walls through which no one (including the individual) can see.

If attempts to think about experience are imagined to be doomed to fail, then ideologists of experience insist upon *and* create conditions that assure the inevitability of this failure. This failure, in turn, transmits an experience of its own, an experience of intellectual failure, which, by a circular sort of logic, confirms the original presupposition that thinking about experience is futile. Put more simply: The failure of thinking about experience is a self-fulfilling prophesy. We may surmise, then, that the experience of the failure of thinking is a desired or desirable experience, an experience we wish to repeat and share. Why should anyone wish to repeat or share the experience of failure? Only if this failure meant a kind of success, which is precisely the arrangement described by Pausch's comment about experience: that 'experience is what you get when you didn't get what you wanted. And experience is often the most valuable thing you have to offer.'

The orientation described above may be contrasted with an ideal of healthy selfhood, necessary for any psychosocial theory. While theories of selfhood may differ widely, and while selfhood, on any account, may not be absolutely or perfectly attainable, it must include the capacity to think, the capacity to act creatively and not compulsively or compliantly, and the capacity to be alone, which entails the capacity to relate meaningfully and ethically with others as objects objectively perceived (outside of fantasy). To be a self means to be not a 'given' thing, just as it means to be not

'given' to others as their property, nor to be 'given over' either to instinctual reactivity or to the pressures of conformity in one's thoughts, feelings, and activities. To be a self is not to be determined by causes or forces arising from outside the metaphorical 'area' delineated by the self, which includes both the human being's biological impulses and forces exerted by others.

Certainly, individuals are profoundly influenced by others, by groups, by institutions, and their internal complements. The literatures of critical theory and social construction, not to mention psychoanalysis, attest to this fact. But the extent to which we may speak about selves and not automata or slaves is precisely the extent to which we may speak about the freedom by which a self can think its own thoughts, create and act upon its own designs, relate meaningfully and communicate symbolically with others, and even retreat into itself to be alone.

These latter processes may be explained by mixing psychoanalytic metaphors and turning briefly to Heinz Kohut's notion of 'selfobjects' (1971). A selfobject, for Kohut, is an object put in the service of holding part of the self that, for one reason or another, the self cannot fully contain. A selfobject may be a security blanket, a parent, a god, or a psychoanalyst who comes to hold alienated aspects of the self. Kohut posited various types of selfobject transference, of varying degrees of importance, as well as varying levels of maturity of selfobjects, yet all selfobjects, for Kohut, are means of forging connections to narcissistic needs. The idealization of a selfobject may be the first step to merging with that object, so as to partake in its greatness and perfection. For instance, a mirroring selfobject may be used to reflect an idealized version of the self, and is likely subjected to the demand that the object affirm grandiose aspects and fantasies about the self.

Imagining some of experience's favored objects — such as 'Fate,' 'the People,' or 'Nature,' — as selfobjects may help us better understand the type of relationship undertaken with objects of experience, even or especially with the vast and amorphous objects that so readily contain grandiose aspects and fantasies. If Nature, for instance, comes to serve as an idealizing selfobject, then one finds in Nature all of one's 'ambitions and ideals' (Alford 1991, 26). One strives to merge with Nature in experiences that endow one with a portion of Nature's perfection. If Nature is a mirroring selfobject, then Nature will be the subject/object in whose presence the self feels affirmed and recognized in its loftiest ambitions: Here, Nature may reflect the ideal of naturalness, natural perfection, or natural innocence, such that only in the experience of Nature is it possible to hold on to positive estimations of the self.

It is important to note that there is nothing inherently pathological about making mature and moderate use of either the moral defense or selfobjects. On the contrary, projection, identification, internalization, and externalization involved are necessary parts of self-development, parts of the process of coming to 'know' the self, in the sense described above. Their health or unhealth, maturity or immaturity, is a matter of degree. The important questions are: 'Do we seek to merge completely with our ideal selfobject so that nothing is left of the self? Or do we learn to choose and use those idealizable

selfobjects that support our chosen projects?' (Alford 1991, 26). The answers to these questions determine the health or pathology of our relationships with experiences and their objects. Can we *use* experience to think, to act, to relate, and to craft an authentic self in the world? Or are experiences and their objects called upon to replace parts of our selves, to hold all that is valuable such that we can only partake in the good when we are immersed in, or subsumed by, experience?

Experience as Trauma, Trauma as Embodied Truth

The construct of psychic trauma and the diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) have been profoundly influential in shaping contemporary ideas about the nature and extent of psychological suffering. Trauma has come to signify a diverse range of human experiences of suffering, loss, victimization, and both physical and psychological violence. At least within certain fields, the idea of trauma has undoubtedly impacted the way we conceive of the possibility and meaning of the self, the relationship between psyche and soma, and the place of the individual in society. In spite of areas of disagreement, contemporary trauma discourses offer a relatively stable normative foundation for the recognition of trauma victims (see, e.g., Fassin and Rechtman 2009). That is, trauma victims, along with non-victims' relations to them, are invested with moral and epistemic meaning, meaning related to ideological assumptions about the experience of trauma.

Primary among the qualities attributed to the experience of trauma is its putative ability to grant privileged access to truth. It is the 'truth of traumatic experience,' writes the best-known trauma theorist in the humanities, Cathy Caruth, 'that forms the center of its pathology or symptoms.' The 'overwhelming occurrence' of trauma returns insistently to the traumatized individual, although in delayed and incomplete forms, yet remains 'absolutely true to the event.' Therefore, the pathology of trauma 'is not a pathology … of falsehood or displacement of meaning, but of history itself.' Trauma is 'a symptom of history,' and 'the traumatized … carry an impossible [yet true] history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess' (1995, 5).

The marriage of cognitive neuroscience with literary and cultural studies in the 1990s and 2000s has produced an ideology of trauma that both laments and celebrates some of the most extreme, violent, and destructive moments of human life and human history. As will be discussed below, it has resulted in some curious conceptions of the body, its affects, and their relation to the psyche and the self. In speaking of the 'literal truth' and 'historical reality' of traumatic experience, our discourses of trauma resemble those valorizations of injurious and adverse experiences discussed above, in which bad experiences were incorporated without mediation or moderation, and in which the attainment and preservation of their 'goodness' or value relied upon the deployment of primitive and defensive stratagems aimed at suppressing the self.

Widespread agreement about the truth and reality of traumatic experience seems difficult to distinguish from acceptance of trauma victims' understandings of events, particularly of the events held responsible for generating post-traumatic symptoms,

which are often considered to contain a 'literal' truth. Caruth, for instance, understands trauma as inherently 'unknowable' (1996, 57-62) and inherently 'latent' (1995, 4-11), while at the same time defining post-traumatic experience as 'absolutely literal' (1995, 4) and 'the literal return of the event' (1996, 59).

In her meticulous genealogy, Ruth Leys describes the dramatic shift in trauma theory that compelled researchers to reject the construct's murky intellectual origins and the 'mimetic dimension' of trauma symptoms (2000, 40). Since the end of the Vietnam War, and in light of the psychiatric ratification of PTSD in the DSM-III (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Third Edition) in 1980, clinical, medical, literary, and philosophical communities have located the traumatic quality of trauma, as it were, in the experience of an overwhelming thing-in-itself that leaves a non-cognizable imprint on an increasingly physical conception of the psyche, piercing its boundaries, shattering its integrity, disrupting contact with itself, and precluding its capacity to function, attach, and relate. Leys describes this conceptual shift in language that is, itself, reminiscent of the well-known trauma symptom of exteriorization:

> The antimimetic turn … is simultaneously the moment when emphasis tends to shift from the notion of trauma as involving a mimetic yielding of identity to identification to a notion of trauma as a purely external cause or event that comes to an already constituted ego to shatter its autonomy and integrity. Passionate identifications are thereby transformed into claims of identity, and the negativity and violence that according to hypothesis inhere in the mimetic breaching of the boundaries between the internal and the external are violently expelled into the external world, from where they return to the fully constituted, autonomous subject in the form of an absolute exteriority. The result is a rigid dichotomy between internal and external such that violence is imagined as coming to the subject entirely from the outside. (2000, 37)

The turn Leys helpfully describes involves our understanding not merely of the nature or process of traumatization, but of the status of a self that *must have existed* in order to be traumatized. That is, the corollary of the process of exteriorization is the creation of an 'inside' undertaken in bad faith. Contemporary notions of trauma create a self, a 'straw self,' if you will, that is inevitably lost, constituted in order to be destroyed at the moment of trauma. 'In trauma,' writes Caruth,

> the outside has gone inside without any mediation. … There is an incomprehensible outside of the self that has already gone inside without the self's mediation, hence without any relation to the self, and this consequently becomes a threat to any understanding of what a self might be in this context. (1996, 59, 132n)

There must be an 'inside,' a self, and a boundary in order for there to be an obliteration of the same in a traumatic experience that occurs 'without any relation to the self.'

Henry Krystal has noted that the traumatized experience life as originating almost entirely from the outside, from the not-self:

> Much of the psychic representation of the 'enemy' or 'oppressor' or even impersonal elements such as 'fate' and clearly personal attributes like one's own emotions come to be experienced as outside the self-representation. Thus, the post-traumatic state is characterized by an impoverishment of the areas of one's mind to which the 'I' feeling of self-sameness is extended, and a hypertrophy of the 'Not-I' alienated areas. (1995, 85)

Recent trauma theory, in this sense, recapitulates trauma symptomology, and may even be thought to involve theorists, writers, and intellectuals in dynamics similar to those undergone by the traumatized. That contemporary theories of trauma presuppose a self, then assert trauma's activity to be that of penetrating, dis-integrating, and taking up residence where the self lives no longer, makes traumatic experience a curious thing, a kind of experience without an experiencer, arising from an absolute outside, yet left indelibly 'inside,' lodged somewhere between the (lost) self and the (lost) world. Trauma is present, all-too-present, for the traumatized, yet, as it is deemed unthinkable and unknowable, can only be expected to find its place in the body, such that the body that expresses trauma's paradoxically 'literal' presence has become trauma's privileged locale.

'Body studies,' the sociological and anthropological 'turns to corporeality,' and the 'affective turn' have all problematized the idea of 'molar bodies,' such that bodies are no longer conceived as simple, material things, but as 'processes' and even 'organizers' of 'diverse practices and areas of experience.' Bodies are 'open, relational, human and non-human, material and immaterial, multiple, sentient, and processual' (Blackman 2008, 2849-51; see also Clough 2007).

On one hand, the psyche has been physicalized in psychological and philosophical discourses over the past several decades, in no small part due to the influence of trauma theory. Teresa Brennan's work on the 'transmission of affect' (2004) goes so far as to declare that:

> the psyche is, of course, also a physical or embodied thing. This has to be so if one accepts the premise that the psychical actually gets into the flesh, whether it is manifest as the inertia of depression, or as an actual psychosomatic illness, or in other ways, such as anger. It is these embodied psychical urges, these constellations of affects, that lead us to eat the wrong way, do the wrong things, push ourselves for the wrong reason, and so forth. (156)

On the other hand, the body seems to be no longer a thing at all, but an ironically abstract 'organizing process.' In order to understand bodies, we must not 'start with bodies as a key focus,' but with 'concerns about lived experience, sleep, marching, dance, identity, eating disorders, technologies, the placebo effect, communication, body language, performance, emotion, twinning and cloning, the senses, the mouth and health and illness' (Blackman 2008, 2847-49). Amid this odd assortment of experiences and phenomena, the body is always:

> *in process* and is assembled and made up from the diverse relays, connections and relationships between artefacts, technologies, practices and matter which

> temporarily form it as a particular kind of object. However, even the term 'it' implies a form or shape that can be easily recognizable as a body. What is clear … is that talk of the body extends to talk of body assemblages that might not resemble the molar body in any shape or form. (2849-55, emphasis in original)

Contemporary bodies, apparently, may not resemble bodies at all, not only because bodies are now imagined as organizers and processes, but because bodies 'always extend and connect to other bodies, human and non-human, to practices, techniques, technologies and objects which produce different kinds of bodies' (Blackman 2012, ix-x). That is, parallel to the endeavor to demonstrate the permeability and inter-dependence of subjects, the body, too, has become that which is not individually possessed but shared, ever exposed to experiences transmitted and disseminated by or through other bodies. Since 'bodies are processes,' bodies are 'articulated and articulate through their connections with others, human and non-human' (Blackman 2008, 2857-58). What truly defines bodies, then, is their 'capacity to affect and be affected' (Blackman 2012, x).

Perhaps the physicalization of trauma is not entirely surprising, for if traumatic experience cannot be thought or known, neither can the body. If what defines the body is its constant contact with other bodies, then it may be imagined to receive and transmit truth more reliably than other human faculties. 'Body language,' to take a rather mundane example, is often taken to be more a real and 'honest' form of expression than the spoken or written word (see Csordas 2008). As the renowned American dancer Martha Graham averred, 'the body never lies' (see Burt 1988, 34). Later, Alice Miller (2006) would borrow her famous dictum to title her study of the physical manifestations of childhood abuse. To suggest that 'the body never lies' is to suggest not only that the body can hold the unknowable truths of experience, but that the body can safeguard experience from the distortions of thought.

Indeed, it may be fruitful to conceive of the contemporary understanding of the body as that which is not material but real, or, more precisely, real *only* because of its connections with other bodies, only because of its 'capacity to affect and be affected.' If this is true, then the body is real because the body is not thought or known. In several ideologies of experience, the unthinkability of the body is equated with its reality, with the sum of 'artefacts, technologies, practices and matter' that form reality, which can only be reliably incorporated and transmitted through the body's experience.

In a related metaphor, for Bill Holm, 'the divine' is an example of something that is 'entirely abstract, a series of slogans said but not believed in. … Since the divine has *no body*, it needs no place to live.' On the other hand, 'the world is only real estate, and can be filed at the court house' (Holm 2010, 162-63, emphasis added). What Holm means, of course, is that, having no body, the divine cannot be *experienced*, and therefore cannot be trusted to be *real*. On the contrary, things of 'the world,' by which Holm means not merely physical objects but bodies, experiences, failures, and the like, make themselves 'at home' in reality, in 'real estate.' These real things with bodies and earthly homes are what can be 'believed in.' Here, we might expect that Holm intends

to refer not to the sort of belief that requires thought or imagination, but to one that may be located in the body, perhaps in our 'gut feelings.'

Both Caruth's and Leys' accounts imply that theorists' location of the violence of trauma 'outside' the self intends to protect something of the self's constitution, perhaps even to protect the traumatized self from irremediable harm. But if trauma has come to be defined as the intrusion of an overwhelmingly violent and overwhelmingly real 'thing-in-itself,' it is not, as Leys claims, because we inhabit a culture in which 'the therapist demand[s] that the patient be a subject' (2000, 37). Rather, this understanding of trauma identifies traumatic experience as the experience that can only be experienced in the body, which, again, is conceived to be not the same kind of body as it once was, but, rather, a body whose reality is established and realized in its connection with other bodies. This body, or these bodies, come to hold a moral and epistemic authority that serves primarily to protect not selves from traumatic experience, but traumatic experience from selves, from distortion by the self's immaterial and unreal thinking. This discourse of trauma is reminiscent of earlier philosophical and literary discourses of experience, in which an intellectual submission to overwhelming experiences and their objects is conceived to be the surest path to a physical, unknowing truth and wisdom that even the most gifted of writers found it (not surprisingly) difficult to articulate.

At a collective level, the vision of trauma with which we live suggests that we inhabit, or that we ought to inhabit, a 'post-traumatic century' (Felman 1995, 13), which means that our historical truths are preserved not in thoughts or writings but in bodies and their experiences. If this is so, then some have extended the argument so far as to claim that we must 'understand history [itself] as the history of trauma' (Caruth 1996, 60), that 'history,' itself, 'is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas' (24), and that we must approach all 'history as holocaust' (Felman and Laub 1992, 95).

While some, like Reinhart Koselleck (2002), have merely challenged the conventional wisdom that history is written by the victors by claiming that 'historical gains in knowledge stem in the long run from the vanquished,' because 'the history of the vanquished … offers a more truthful expression of 'the experience of history'' (Fassin and Rechtman 2009, 16), others have returned to orientations guided by a fascination with physical violence and terror, such as Walter Benjamin's famous claim that 'to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was',' but rather 'to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger' (2003, 391). Benjamin's assertions seem *prima facie* absurd, yet the ideological proposition of the unquestionable and unknowable truth of traumatic experience remains in force, and, as I now hope to show, has been in force in philosophical treatments of experience undertaken well before trauma's heyday.

Experienced Bodies Cannot Relate, Only Transmit

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud famously tells of a mourning father, whose recently deceased son comes to him in a dream and asks, 'Father, don't you see I'm

burning?' Upon waking, the father sees a glare in the child's room and rushes in to find that the body of his deceased child has been burned by a fallen candle. Freud's explanation of the dream is that the father is able, in the dream, to experience the child as alive once again, and therefore, even given the horrible circumstances, the dream represents a wish. Indeed, Freud writes:

> Here we have the most general and the most striking psychological characteristic of the process of dreaming: a thought, and as a rule a thought of something that is wished, is objectified in the dream, is represented as a scene, or, as it seems to us, is experienced. (1950, 534)

Caruth, following Lacan, sees in the dream, instead, a traumatic repetition and a 'traumatic awakening' in which the father finds that his self 'is bound up with, or founded in, the death that he survives' (1996, 92). In fact, Caruth claims that

> what the father cannot grasp in the death of his child … becomes the foundation of his very identity as a father. In thus relating trauma to the very identity of the self and to one's relation to another … the shock of traumatic sight reveals at the heart of human subjectivity not so much an epistemological, but rather what can be defined as an ethical relation to the real. (1996, 92)

By this logic, since the death of his child is a trauma, and since the self is not, according to Caruth, present in trauma, then the father could not have been present to witness his child's death: The father must have failed to see it. For a father to dream that his living child demands that he see the child burning, for Caruth, becomes an insistence that the father *see and live out his own failure to see*, to see his own 'repeated failure to respond' (103).

'The awakening' that results from the dream and that occurs, on a metaphorical level, within the dream, 'embodies an appointment with the real,' writes Caruth, again echoing Lacan. And 'the real' here is identical to the 'awakening [that] is itself the site of trauma, the trauma of the necessity and impossibility of responding to another's death' (1996, 100). That is, 'the real' is always 'the site of trauma,' which escapes us. On this line of thought, 'real' experiences and traumatic experiences can *never* be experiences of the self's reality, only of the self's 'inevitable' yet 'necessary' *failures* to be, to think, to see, and to act in reality. Caruth claims that it is these experiences of failed being, thinking, seeing, and doing that cannot be imagined or represented but that also 'demand' to be shared or transmitted, meaning that, in their sharing, the witness or listener also must fail to be present. 'The repeated failure to have seen in time,' Caruth continues, 'can be transformed into the imperative of a speaking that awakens others'; awakens them, no doubt, to 'the appointment with the real' that consists not of the trauma itself but of the 'missing' of it (108).

There are only minor differences between such claims and ontological-existential claims that conceive of 'failure as 'the Real'' (Oprisko 2014; see also Žižek 1989, 2008), where the Real is 'a kind of ontological 'collateral damage' of symbolic operations: the process of symbolization is inherently thwarted, doomed to fail, and the

Real is this immanent failure of the symbolic' (Žižek 2012, 959). Both of these types of claims, as Žižek himself admits, are difficult to distinguish from moral demands that elements of trauma ought to remain central parts of our shared experience. Thus, within debates about witnessing and representing trauma, and in spite of the well-known difficulties in communicating traumatic narratives, one often discovers the assumption that trauma *should be* transmitted and shared.

'In order to be diffused,' Nossery and Hubbell argue, 'trauma must move beyond isolation and be shared with participants willing to engage in the victim's torment. … The [transmissive] encounter could be beneficial for both the victim and the addressee, *as it merges the two parties' experiences*' (2013, 11, emphasis added). The assumption that a merger of experience is desirable, and perhaps even superior to a relationship between selves and a communication of experiences, is discussed in greater detail in subsequent chapters. A substantial part of the logic of such an assumption is derived from the belief that experience, even vicarious experience, can rescue selves from their inevitable isolation, vanity, and destructiveness.

In Shoshana Felman's words, we are obliged by 'the imperative of bearing witness' (1995, 16), duty-bound to share our traumatic history, yet this sharing remains problematic, since trauma must remain 'referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs … grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence' (Caruth 1996, 18). In spite of the urgency with which we are exhorted to transmit trauma, what can be transmitted is only a confounding experience, an experience of incomprehension, perhaps even an experience of *not being, not being* in relation to the individual bearing witness, *not being* in contact with the self, *not being* in relation to the not-self of the traumatized. A malformed missive, a message that 'self-destructs' upon arrival, traumatic experience occludes thinking about trauma, just as transmitting trauma seems to involve a traumatic failure of thinking, communicating, and being.

Dori Laub claims that the witness to trauma or traumatic narrative

> come[s] to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially *experience* trauma in himself. The relation of the victim to the event of the trauma, therefore, impacts on the relation of the listener to it, and the latter comes to feel the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels. (1992, 57-58, emphasis added)

If what must be transmitted, according to Walter Benn Michaels, is 'not the normalizing knowledge of the horror but the horror itself,' then this 'horror itself' is not even the horror of the traumatic event but the horror of failing *to be* in its presence (quoted in Leys 2000, 268).

Since we cannot — and must not — think or know experience, we can only share traumatic experience in the breakdown of language and reason, in the 'failure of witnessing or representation,' which is to say: in the active destruction of the knowledge of experience and of our presence of being in experience. Attempts at thinking, relating, communicating, or other expressions of self-being would distort the traumatic truth, for

if trauma is a 'symptom of history,' then 'it is a symptom which must not … be cured but simply transmitted, passed on' (Leys 2000, 268-69).

Discourses of trauma, literatures of atrocity and the Holocaust, 'traumatized texts' of contemporary literature, and insistences that we protect traumatic objects from corruption by thought form the new core of the ideology of experience. This ideology sets forth an ethical demand that we surmount our 'crisis of truth' by undertaking a deliberate 'infection,' 'contaminat[ion]' (Leys 2000, 268), and 'contagion' (Caruth 1995, 10; Terr 1988) of traumatic material across persons and groups. We might say that the ethical imperative yielded by the ideology of (traumatic) experience is to transmit a homeopathic 'plague experience' in order to inoculate the population against the moral plagues of thinking and selfhood.

It is likely that the valorization of transmitting trauma both eases the burden of the traumatized victim — by making use of projective identification to witness one's trauma in others — and sustains the fantasy of a future community of victims in which the self has 'depart[ed],' a community united by trauma, strengthened by immediate connections to traumatizing objects and experiences. 'In a catastrophic age,' Caruth writes, 'trauma may provide the very link between cultures … as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves' (1995, 11).

In his short paper entitled, 'Communicating and not communicating leading to a study of certain opposites,' Winnicott discusses the 'incommunicado element' of self, a 'secret self' or sacred core that must be protected from the world of objects, lest it be adjusted or altered (1965, 187). But if we are possessed by an ideology of trauma, then instead of generating the feeling of reality in the self by making contact with this secret incommunicado element, we may turn to traumatizing objects to replace non-communicative elements of the self.

The dynamic I have in mind is not precisely the 'mimetic dimension' of trauma to which Leys draws our attention (2000, 18-40), but one in which experiences of trauma, failure, and deprivation, along with the objects that are imagined to deliver such experiences — be they Nature, Fortune, God, Chance, the Law, the Nation, or the Community — supplant a part of the self. Now it is the traumatic experience and its object that must be protected, just as if they were the 'secret self,' and it is the traumatic experience and its object that must be nourished and contacted in order to find feelings of aliveness and reality. The attributions of unknowability and unthinkability we ascribe to both experience and trauma, then, reflect the same need to protect what are taken to be the most sacred elements of our psyches against being found or altered.

Of course, in spite of what we are told by celebrants of trauma and experience, the internalization of objects of traumatizing experience cannot succeed in providing sought-after feelings of reality and aliveness. Ambivalent desires to both hide and transmit our experiences derive from this failure. Traumatic experiences are hidden because they are confused with the secret, non-communicative element of self, having substituted an identity with an identification. They are transmitted and re-transmitted

because, having failed to issue in the feelings of value, vitality, and reality for which we had hoped, we mistake our task to be that of confirming our inner traumatic experience in the world outside, by provoking or instilling it in others.

Our preoccupation with and physicalization of trauma, along with our fascination with experiences of failure, victimization, and suffering may represent a need to demonstrate to ourselves and others the impossibility of *ever having established a real, vital self*. This demonstration serves the purpose of reassuring ourselves that the exchange of selfhood for identification with traumatizing objects and experiences is 'good.' What is more, if a real, vital, thinking, relating, creative self is impossible to begin with, then we may be absolved of feelings of guilt, not only at having failed to achieve this ideal for ourselves, but for our impulses to share our own traumatic experiences with others. Shoshana Felman claims:

> What there is to witness urgently in the human world … is always fundamentally, in one way or another, the scandal of an illness, of a metaphorical or literal disease; and that the imperative of bearing witness, which here proceeds from the contagion of the Plague — from the eruption of an evil that is radically incurable — is itself somehow a philosophical and ethical correlative of a situation with no cure, and of a radical human condition of exposure and vulnerability. (1995, 16)

Conclusion

For Felman, what Camus' famous novel, *La Peste* [*The Plague*] (1991) teaches is that what is most important to experience, witness, and testify to in the world is physical trauma, suggesting, along the lines of Judith Herman's argument, that every instance of traumatic injury 'is a standing challenge to the rightness of the social order' (quoted in Shay 1995, 3). On this line of thought, what plagues teach us is that disease, illness, suffering, and trauma compose *the human condition*, a condition with 'no cure,' and, therefore, a condition that must be experienced, witnessed, shared, and even preserved as part of our heritage, and not reasoned away.

Since, for Felman, to witness is not to analyze or understand but to transmit that which is not entirely communicable by thought and language, a real danger presented by plagues is that we will cease witnessing them and start thinking about them, that we will yield to the 'sin of wanting to know,' which would mean becoming morally infected by the plague of abstraction, rather than preserving the incomprehensible experience of plague in our bodies, in our communal bodies, and in the shared corpus of human history.

Instead of being ideologists of reason, we are urged to be ideologists of illness, plague, and evil, insisting that inexorable, 'incurable,' experiences of horror stand at the center of human life and must remain there. They must not be abstracted, thought about, or known, lest we diffuse or dislodge their necessary badness, necessary perhaps so that we may continue to adopt a posture of scandalized outrage, which, somewhat conveniently, leaves us morally unaccountable for evil in the world while permitting us

to transmit our traumatic experiences to others under the aegis of 'bearing witness' (see Bowker 2014).

Perhaps we may now see why popular cultural entertainments are so replete with fantasies of seemingly horrifying experiences of persecution, victimization, apocalypse, inhuman monsters, and supernatural evils: because these scenarios reinforce the psychic organization demanded by the ideologies of experience in which the destruction of the self is inevitable and thinking, in general — and, specifically, thinking *psychosocially* about the relationships between body and psyche, individual and society — constitute the true outrage.

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