Into the Middle of Things:
Traumatic Redemption and the Politics of Form

by

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INTRODUCTION

Tesseract and Trauma

In Madeleine L’Engle’s 1962 classic children’s novel *A Wrinkle in Time*, the Murry children and friends go on an intergalactic journey to rescue their missing physicist father, traveling across space and time by way of the titular “wrinkle in time.” This wrinkling is formally introduced as a “tesseract,” a geometric term that L’Engle adopts in her sci-fi-fantasy style to imagine movement across the universe in a mixed mathematical, metaphorical, and magical register. The mysterious tesseract, we learn, was at the heart of Mr. Murry’s top-secret, government-sponsored project before he disappeared, and it returns as the means to save him through the help of Mrs. Whatsit, Mrs. Who, and Mrs. Which.

The Mrs. W’s—mystical ex-stars turned guardian angels, with a hint of witchiness mixed in—inicate the children’s extra-terrestrial journey in an unexplained lurch through space-time. The protagonist Meg Murry is plunged into total darkness, “completely alone” as her brother and friend are “torn from her.” She tries to scream, but the “word[s are] flung back down her throat.” Meg feels this highly sensory experience precisely insofar as there is suddenly nothing to sense at all, beyond vibrations in the darkness, beyond silence. “Alone in a fragment of nothingness,” Meg senses “no light, no sound, no feeling,” and cannot react because her body too is “gone”; for the moment, “the corporeal Meg simply was not.” (57)

Suddenly, sensation returns as the rupturous and unexplained event comes to a close. Meg feels her heart beating again, wondering if she ever felt it stop at all. She feels

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movement in her own body and of her body in space, imagining that this motion “must be the turning of the earth,” as “somewhat like the feeling of being in the ocean,” and perhaps as all part of a terrible dream (58). The three children and the Mrs. W’s rematerialize in a shimmering fall to earth, or rather, the planet Uriel. Throughout the novel, the tesseract’s seeming literary magic is enmeshed with discomfort, disorientation, and panic for Meg, who feels the effects of “tessering” the strongest, even to the point of complete paralysis in a later scene (162). Fraught with ambiguity, Meg’s heightened sensation identifies experiential details in a hybridized deductive-imaginative mode—motion, feeling, association, and confusion entangle in the experience in these wrinkles.

When asked to explain the science of the tesseract, the Mrs. W’s have a hard time finding concise human language to express it and turn to an analogy, which is accompanied in the text by a visual diagram. The tesseract, Mrs. Whatsit explains, provides the opportunity to travel faster than the speed of light by taking the “shortcut” of the (alleged) fifth dimension (75). Demonstrating with the fabric of her skirt, Mrs. Whatsit explains that:

“if a very small insect were to move from the section of skirt in Mrs. Who’s right hand to that in her left, it would be quite a long walk for him if he had to walk straight across.”

Swiftly Mrs. Who brought her hands, still holding the skirt, together. “Now, you see,” Mrs. Whatsit said, “he would be there, without that long trip. That is how we travel.” (76)
The Mrs. W’s shift to mathematics—itself a kind of analogy via representational formulas—to explain that if the first three dimensions are of space and the fourth is of time, then the tesseract comprises the fifth dimension (at least, in the world of the story). A line squared makes a square, which squared makes a cube, and squared again adds time into the mix to create the possibility of four-dimensional movement in what physicists have termed “space-time.” The fifth dimension, then, while relatively elusive in the novel, entails an added dimension to space-time that allows for its warping in which five-dimensional movement may occur. This movement happens in and because of the folding of the spatio-temporal fabric, modelled imperfectly but creatively with the skirt to pique the imagination of the reader who is likewise situated in the thick material of space-time.

Though L’Engle’s tesseract may lack explicit detail and scientific plausibility, Meg’s narrativized experience of the tesseracts provides an intriguing example to think through phenomenological modes of trauma. The tesseract presents a useful metaphor for traumatic experience, which will impel this thesis as a theoretical category of insight into cultural narratives. Like the tesseract, trauma is said to rip its victims out of their lifeworlds in an event so sudden and violent that it cannot be fully processed in the moment. These events are remembered in fragments through a mix of disembodied and highly visceral sensations. Trauma cannot be neatly incorporated into its victim’s existing worldview but instead restructures and persists in dislocation with the victim’s world as it is otherwise experienced.² *A Wrinkle in Time*’s tesseracts exemplify this mode of

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² Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History.* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 11. See also Chapter One, 27.
overwhelming experience half-narrativized, which is perhaps best understood at the level of its material contingency upon space-time.

Space-time and Time-spaces

Figure 1: A diagram of space-time, elucidated below. (Illustration by Sarah Prickett, adapted from David M. Harrison, “The Special Theory of Relativity,” University of Toronto Department of Physics, April 1999, accessed April 12, 2017, https://faraday.physics.utoronto.ca/PVB/Harrison/SpecRel/SpecRel.html.)

Since Einstein’s theorization of general relativity, the concept of space-time has captured the imaginations of physicists, artists, and cultural theorists alike. The prevalent space-time diagram reproduced above provides a cursory but generative way to visualize its form. The x-axis represents the three-dimensions of space, the y-axis maps the dimension of time, and the axes intersect at the present time and place of the graphed moving object (x=0, y=0). The object’s movement is represented by the squiggly “worldline” of its motion through time and space that moves from the Cartesian plane’s
lower region of the past (where \( y<0 \)) upward through the future (where \( y>0 \)).\(^3\)

Superimposed on this graph is the “light cone,” which sets the parameters of the moving object’s worldline. The speed of light is the fastest possible speed at which an object can move through our universe—at least, in a space-time without L’Englean tesseracts or their equivalents—so the slope of the worldline cannot exceed the light cone’s boundaries. Complicated extensions of this diagram are used to predict and map astronomical events, such as the potential collisions of drifting galaxies or the impact of a supernova. These mathematics go beyond the scope of this thesis, but the diagram remains a useful aid in visualizing the thickening of space and time throughout this thesis.

The danger of this graph—especially when cursorily explained as it is here—is its suggestion that space-time provides a stable arena in which autonomous objects move freely, an idea that is explicitly counter to space-time’s theorization in general relativity and its implications for relational ontologies. Mary-Jane Rubenstein paraphrases the linchpin that “space and time are neither independent nor static substances” but instead “compose a dynamic ‘space-time’ that can grow, shrink, bend and warp in relation to matter and energy.”\(^4\) Space-time does not merely denote four abstracted dimensions somehow combined in a mathematical formula; rather, it entails the very materializing of space and time together, the substance that constitutes motion through and of its constantly fluctuating fabric. This co-materializing implicates these objects into the stuff

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\(^3\) Elsewhere, the “worldline” and its implicit singular autonomous object traveling through linear time are complicated into two-dimensional “worldsheets” and three-dimensional “worldvolumes.” (Luis E. Ibáñez and Angel M. Uranga, *String Theory and Particle Physics: An Introduction to String Phenomenology* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012], 64, 158.)

of space-time’s relational web, a quality that Nancy Tuana terms the “viscous porosity” of our interconnected world in which co-agentic entities (in her case, those include Hurricane Katrina, people, levees, and the U.S. government) shape each other through the porosity of their touching “membranes.” Tim Ingold describes this intimate relationship among beings and space-time in the way that they “continually and reciprocally bring each other into being.” These objects do not perform with autonomous agency against the backdrop of their passive setting. A person, for example, does not walk down the street without being affected and formed by the phenomena of their environment (cracked sidewalks, fellow pedestrians, a speeding car, traffic lights, rain, et cetera). Ingold instead imagines these porous “organisms” moving along trajectories that form “strand[s] in a tissue of trails that together make up the texture of the lifeworld,” a “meshwork” woven from materially co-constituted organisms, relations, and space-time. Everything is connected at the level of its materiality—which is not to say that everything is directly connected to everything else, but that webs of relation string together in this meshwork, and distant threads can tug at each other in unexpected and even hard-to-trace but nonetheless powerful ways.

This relational meshwork is not simply a pretty poetic abstraction but the very world system through which systemic violences are enacted, a meshwork in which we are all vulnerable because our bodies are materially connected to the rest of the world.

Responding to the 9/11-induced crisis of global violence, Judith Butler argues that

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7 Ibid.
probing this terrifying sense of vulnerability would more effectively dismantle systems of violence than the Bush administration’s increase in military aggression under the guise of national security. Butler’s argument relies upon injury’s intrinsic reminder that “there are others out there on whom my life depends, people I do not know or may never know.”

Such a “condition [cannot] be will[ed] away,” nor can we “precisely ‘argue against’ it,” despite human beings’ constant attempts to do so, as evidenced in the United States’ national defense measures during the War on Terror. Instead, Butler suggests that a study of injury itself may discover “the mechanism of its distribution,” “who else suffers,” and the opportunity to think about this “inevitable interdependency … as the basis for global political community.” For Butler, and for the trauma studies scholars whom we will encounter in this thesis, thinking relationally becomes the key to unpacking how our lives and social systems are interwoven in ways that quite literally shape how we exist together.

While we are all implicated in this meshwork, variously identified people are affected differently depending on how they are physically and semiotically positioned within the meshwork. George Yancy frames his exploration of African American racial trauma through trauma’s definitional “precondition” of “sociality,” a precondition that he characterizes as “the reality of being embodied with others, along with a background of a shared intelligibility.” Yancy explains that trauma’s dominant conception as exceptionally “exposed,” “open,” and vulnerable, however, typically relies upon the underlying metaphysical assumption that human beings are otherwise sealed-off subjects who are able to move through an objectified world because of their necessary autonomy.

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10 Ibid., xii, 19.
11 Ibid., xii-xiii.
The way this latter metaphysic informs dominant definitions of trauma is, for Yancy, both “false” and “unethical.” As we have seen through the dynamic principles of space-time itself, agents—traumatized or not—do not move freely in a static world, so to imply that they can exacerbates traumatic suffering in its failure to live up to the imagined norm of free agency. This characterization of trauma as not what human experience is supposed to be fails to reflect the realities of traumatic experience and instead maintains idealized extremes of in/stability and dis/order for their own sake. We will see this problem throughout this thesis in the ways that trauma constructed as dis-order works to reify hierarchies of order rather than produce terms that reflect the mechanisms of trauma itself.12

Echoing our previously cited relational ontologists, Yancy advocates for a metaphysic that understands human beings as “fundamentally social” and “ontologically relational” in order to make space for the impact of trauma on the network of bodies in which our lived experiences take place. Racialized trauma particularly exemplifies the physical effects of semiotics, as it necessarily manifests in a “shared symbolic world … whose meanings can impact us and undo us in violent and harrowing ways.” Yancy extends the principle of sociality as both metaphoric and material in the claim that “racialized bodies are always already ‘touching’ through a socially shared skin,” rethinking the metaphysical predicament posed by universalized, autonomous subjectivity. Thinking about the social world through its mechanisms reveals the connections between the representational and material properties of form, just as a scientific equation or diagram can visually represent the force(s) that we call gravity. The

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theoretical and the material become mutually inclusive, as “black embodied wounds” must be examined at the levels of “the mundane, the quotidian, the muck and mire of a racist … social skin through which anti-Black encounters are suffered.” Thinking of form in a theoretical register can inadvertently abstract it when that form universalizes its material referents, as we will see in reductively medicalized healing discourses that do not actually take trauma’s mechanisms into account; however, carefully theorizing trauma in conversation with its “concrete expressions” becomes more promising as we consider what narrative forms account for and engage with “the funkiness of broken bodies, burned flesh, troubled affect, and scarred psyches.”

As we consider the interacting narratives that make up traumatized world systems, we will need to interrogate the parameters of their formation, returning us to the dynamic material of space-time and its various time-spaces. Drawing explicitly from the language of general relativity, narrative theorist Mikhail Bakhtin puts forth the term “chronotope” to begin to articulate “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.” The chronotope denotes the “time space” in which a story happens, and each type is “formally constitutive” of what genres, characters, actions, plots, and overall narratives are possible within it. The fusion of time and space amplifies their now interconnected properties as space becomes motive and time becomes material. Bakhtin describes this materiality of time in terms of the body: time represented in literature “thickens” and “takes on flesh” as it “becomes … palpable and visible” while “the chronotope makes narrative events concrete” and

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13 Ibid., 2.
15 Ibid., 85.
“causes blood to flow in their veins.”\textsuperscript{16} The “merge[d]” time-space becomes “a force giving body to the entire novel,” and “the novel’s abstract elements … gravitate toward the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood.”\textsuperscript{17} These bodily elements arise as well in the way in which space, through the chronotope, “becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history,” given that motion entails the relation of a body in space and time to space and time.\textsuperscript{18} The metaphorics of the body, with Bakhtin’s imagery of flesh and blood, gives the chronotope and the narrative/s within it their urgent power as present and vulnerable, both suspended and bound by time and space.

Throughout this thesis I will return to these concepts, and it is important to note my distinction between “space-time” and “time-space.” In my usage, “space-time” denotes the material in which we and the rest of the universe exist, whereas a “time-space” denotes a particularly constructed world system in which a narrative—fictional or experienced—can come into play. In Bakhtin’s chronotopic metaphysics these time-spaces are necessarily plural and rarely, if ever, exist out of context of one another. These time-spaces are “mutually inclusive” and “may be interwoven with, replace or oppose one another, contradict one another or find themselves in ever more complex interrelationship.”\textsuperscript{19} This multiplicity of time-spaces translates well to conversations about trauma, in which variously traumatized and non-traumatized individuals and groups experience the world differently. Trauma studies are often directed through trauma’s narratological question: how events are perceived, remembered, and

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 84, 250.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 250.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 84.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 252.
interpreted; how those interpretations affect social interactions and social organization; and what narrative forms can best represent different types of traumatic experience. One could argue that insofar as trauma disrupts and reconstructs its survivors’ narratives, it alters the metaphorical meta/physics of their time-spaces.

Likewise, as Yancy intimates and as we will see Ta-Nehisi Coates confront in the third chapter of this thesis, differently racialized groups of American people seem to live in alternate time-spaces that shape and preclude possibilities of their actions in the American (and global) meshwork. The relatively arbitrary assignment of people to different time-spaces proves a significant conflict with the Declaration of Independence’s promise of a universal chronotope in which “all men are created equal” and “endowed by the Creator with certain unalienable rights” to “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Therefore, we can see already that the work of reconciling three conflicting ontological claims—the desire for social equity in which everyone has the same rights, the systems of injustice that preclude those rights, and the necessary fact that everyone experiences the world differently—requires attention to the mechanics of their narrative forms.

**Teleology of the American Dream**

This navigation of equity, oppression, and experience transpires in a religiously inflected ontology, as explicitly evidenced in the founders’ attribution of human rights to the implicitly Christian creator-god. This early American Dream narrative emerges within and reconstitutes an idyllic American time-space characterized by its ethos of

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essentialized humanity driven by democratic values and divine providence. We can see in
the oft-lauded proto-Dream of the Declaration of Independence that its driving narrative
emerges in the triangulated fields of Christianity, American progressive ideals, and
trauma recovery that aim to end the suffering of their human subjects in a distinctly
redemptive key.

The American Dream itself has a long history in the American cultural imaginary
and concentrates in nodules of reflection and revolution that return to America’s
foundation as a means of accessing America’s future. The Dream reinforces a certain
kind of American identity by rooting it within the divinely ordained cosmological
timeline of American progress, empowering a set of cultural symbols by positioning
them in narrative time: because of the past, we can do x action in the present for the
sake of the future goal. This narrative power can be better understood through the
insights into American civil religion that examine national symbols, narratives, and
practices through the tools of religious studies. Conrad Cherry attributes the Dream’s
base narrative to the biblically inherited story shape of God’s “chosen people” who are
promised future dominion over the land and innumerable descendants and who utilize
this chosenness to warrant intertribal conflict and territory seizure as part of the
providential plan.21 Likewise, American actions have often been justified in their
functions for American destiny, whether at the level of an individual’s “working hard to
get ahead” or the U.S. government’s efforts to spread democracy around the globe.

This consequential narrativization contextualizes abstracted American values
such as opportunity, prosperity, and exceptionalism within teleology—that is, a

21 Conrad Cherry, *God’s New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (Chapel Hill: University of
worldview oriented toward its ultimate endpoint or *telos*. This teleological form echoes the basic cosmology underlying Christianity’s many iterations. Most forms of Christianity divide world history into epochs that move from creation and the fall through the Christ event (his life, death, and resurrection) and toward the ultimate Judgement Day that will end the world in its finale of salvation. As we will examine more closely in Chapter Two, such a teleology configures all events into the overall timeline of the Christian cosmos, motivating good Christian behavior in its adherents to end up on the right side of history.\(^{22}\) One of the best ways to think about this story-shape is by drawing it out.

\[\text{Figure 2: A provisional sketch of the Christian cosmology timeline, which moves from its linear beginning point of creation (itself preceded by God’s existence) toward its *telos* of ultimate salvation. (Illustration by Sarah Prickett, in conversation with the author.)}^{23}\]

\(^{22}\) We can trace this arc in the Biblical chronology from the creation (Gen. 1-2) and fall from paradise (Gen. 3) through the Gospels that narrate Jesus’ life and into the climax offered by Revelation. (New Revised Standard Version.) In his letters that make up a significant chunk of the New Testament, St. Paul explicates the death of Christ as the fundamental act of reconciliation between God and the world that enables and promises ultimate salvation. (See, for example, David Peterson, “Atonement in Paul’s Writings,” *Biblical Theology and Worship*, 2009, accessed April 18, 2017, http://davidpeterson.com/atonement/atonement-in-pauls-writings.) This interpretation configures the Christ event within a linear narrative that relates all other events to this pivotal moment and the story-shape that it catalyzes. We will see this basic framework return Chapter Two’s theologies of trauma, e.g., in Serene Jone’s gloss of the “sin-grace story” (See Chapter Two, 62).

\(^{23}\) This diagram and the subsequent one on page 16 are partially inspired by George Marsden’s dispensationalist teleology diagram. (*Fundamentalism and American Culture*, [New York: Oxford University Press, 2006], 64-65.) It is also worth noting that a quick google image search of variations on the phrases “Christian chronology diagram,” “Christian cosmology timeline,” et cetera, will yield a similar images that, while uncited, trace out the same basic timeline.
In addition to its compelling story arc, the Dream’s narrative “ambiguity is the very source of its mythic power,” making it both adaptable and elusive.\textsuperscript{24} The Dream is constructed through a mix of “material” and “spiritual component[s]” that offer tangible yields of citizenship, class mobility, and affluence as well as its characteristic “blend of optimism and happiness” that both fortifies and abstracts its material promises.\textsuperscript{25} The Dream’s form as “state of mind” makes it “virtually impossible to eliminate” when compared to tangible, specific legal rights, and yet this dream-state produces an abstracted always-about-to-be-realized effect that “will always remain elusive and, therefore, disappoint us.”\textsuperscript{26} The shapeshifting Dream persists as potential narrative framework while it eludes the material difficulties of a narrative lived in space-time (or its variants in literary time-spaces), producing a kind of paradox arguably at the core of teleology itself.

Richard Leeman examines this paradox in teleology’s structural claim that all events occur in service of a single ultimate end or \textit{telos}, and yet “each virtuous act \textit{embodies} the \textit{telos} … only in relation to a \textit{telos} that can never be fully attained.”\textsuperscript{27} When the cosmological Christian teleology of salvation is applied to the individual, a Christian person born in sin is given the potential through faith and work to absolve their inherited sin. This model of redemption relies on a linear progression toward an

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} Jim Cullen, \textit{The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation} (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 7. See also Cherry, \textit{God’s New Israel}, 16.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 12.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Richard W. Leeman, \textit{The Teleological Discourse of Barack Obama} (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), 16. Note, however, that not all teleologies are paradoxical. For example, a pregnancy carried to term lasts for a relatively brief segment of time and does reach its \textit{telos} of birth. One primary difference between these modes of teleology is each one’s relationship to time. (Alexandra Stovicek, “Cultural Dis(orientations): A Phenomenological and Temporal Analysis of Stillbirth as a Queer Experience” [senior essay, Wesleyan University, 2016], 7-11.)
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
implicitly tangible goal, but its ultimate telos of salvation can never be attained in life (only after death) and thus fits squarely within Leeman’s description of “paradoxical” teleology. In the case of the Dream, actions taken in the name of American providence can be justified as realizations of the pre-established telos: think, for example, of Manifest Destiny, the nineteenth century doctrine-myth that encouraged white Americans to violently displace non-“chosen” non-“American” indigenous peoples as an inevitable byproduct of the white Americans’ divinely-ordained entitlement to the land. At the same time, teleological progress maintains its motion through the persistence of the telos’ position in the just-out-of-reach future that continues to entail events of its ongoing realization as the future becomes present.

In addition to this conflict of inverse logics (“perfectability” versus its impossible “perfection”), the salvation paradox complicates itself as the dynamics of sin and redemption multiply and disrupt the teleology’s professed linear narrative through a surprisingly traumatic structure. Motion toward redemption, even when completed, has the tendency to undo itself, cyclically repeating and reformulating the movements of reaching redemption and falling back into sin. At the same time, the negative and elusive collective force of sin haunts and disrupts the redemptive process, seeping in from the edges through intrusive phenomena, and distorting the supposed linear temporality both of the redemptive process and of past and future sins’ intrusions into the present work toward redemption. To visualize this oscillation between the states of negative sin and

28 Ibid., 18
29 Cherry, God’s New Israel, 117.
30 Leeman, Teleological Discourse, 12.
31 While the basic exegesis offered by St. Paul delineates a one-time reconciliation on a cosmological level (see footnote 22), atonement theologies and their cousins of liberation, black, womanist, feminist, trauma-informed, et cetera, theologies continue to grapple with the paradox of this irreconcilable reconciliation experienced in human life. (See, for example, St. Anselm, “Cur Deus Homo,” in Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008], 260-356.)
positive redemption, we can return to the Christian cosmology timeline sketched out on page 13, this time with the added dimension of the sin-redemption y-axis.

![Figure 3: A second provisional sketch of the Christian cosmology. Reading the horizontal dotted line as the x-axis (where y=0 in a Cartesian graph), we see the same chronological movement as in Figure 2 from creation to salvation. The addition of the vertical dimension enables us to map the moral and affective movement of humanity’s oscillation between the states of grace (where y>0) and sin (where y<0). I have also included the worldline of the transcendent God, who remains always in grace, with the two exceptions of the Christ event (when God takes on human flesh and suffers by crucifixion to redeem the world) and Judgement Day (when God/Christ returns to the world to facilitate the end of the world and its happy ending of salvation. This diagram is intended to spur the reader’s thinking with broad strokes; it does not, for example, account for the Holy Ghost who emerges after the resurrection and remains in the world with humanity (See Chapter Two, 79). (Illustration by Sarah Prickett, in conversation with the author.)]

The American Dream likewise poses a danger in its doubled assumption that Americans can move freely as autonomous agents and that there is a correct path to the telos of progress, individual success, U.S. expansion, and the realized values of

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32 This image is partially inspired by an impromptu diagram of a novel’s redemptive story-shape sketched in Matthew Garrett, “The Way of the World 2: Virtue and Sentiment, Writing and Work, Part 2” (class discussion, ENGL 209: From Seduction to Civil War: The Early U.S. Novel, Wesleyan University, English Department, Middletown, CT, April 12, 2017).
democracy. As the Dream justifies temporary suffering as a necessary step to achieving the happy ending of the greater good, it tricks its dreamers into looking at American narratives outside of time as if they are complete, which does not account for the complexities and suffering of experiencing these narratives in time. This obsession with linear redemption obscures the complexities of living in the American meshwork. Attention to the narrative mechanics of teleology among its Christian and American progressive variations opens up the story-shape of redemption and the possible questions that emerge from this focus on narrative.

A Story of Omissions

When we probe the diversity of real Americans’ experiences of American values, this problem of progressive teleology’s flattened time compounds with its implicit reduction of what kind of human subject is able to realize the American Dream. The Dream’s offer of equal opportunity to all Americans who in turn “comprehend and define it in various ways as relevant to their own experiences” proves a major political dilemma insofar as its alleged malleability fails to follow through on its promises. The Dream unifies the American people (grouped as such) by means of erasing their particularities, producing an abstracted population that excludes many types of Americans in the same move that disavows this exclusion. The Dream’s formulation as “a story of omissions” can be traced, in part, to one of its heralded watersheds in the United States Constitution, written by a small group of white landowning men who

33 Hanson and White, 21st Century, 1.
34 Cullen, A Short History, 119.
ventriloquized their own agenda through the singular voice of “We, the People.” This identification of an American “all” fails its population from the start on three counts. First, it reduces its many voices to one perspective, making any voices in the plural an external threat to the national unity represented by one voice. Second, the voice of “the People” is actually the voice of an elite minority, but in attributing the voice to everyone the statement labels the multiple voices of socially marginalized groups as external others that threaten national unity. Third, the celebration of freedom and liberty through a nationally unified independence movement was only made possible in the first place by the American economy’s foundation in slavery: the idea of “freedom” for all is thus deeply entangled with and made possible by the realities of un-freedom for some. James Cone says a version of this in his seminal Theology of Black Liberation when he claims that white “oppressors are ardent lovers of humanity” and “love” black people insofar as they can “put blacks in the category called Humanity” without taking seriously the particular situations of particular people.

The Dream’s two intrinsic contradictions of time (whether its teleological redemption is possible in lived time) and inclusion (whether such a universal vision can be shared with all Americans) continually frustrate the idea of American progressive change. This glaring incongruity of Dream and reality has long been a key point of interrogation for American social justice work, including the lengthy legacy of interwoven movements that have challenged African American slavery and the ongoing

traumas of systemic anti-black racism, many of which have resided in the sweet spot of Christianity and social politics. The Civil Rights movement worked to reclaim the United States’ egalitarian core values by revealing the various ways in which American social realities did not match up with the nation’s alleged ideals. Martin Luther King Jr., himself a Baptist minister, sought to reconcile this gap in part through a theologically inflected American teleology of social progress. His monumental “I Have a Dream” speech remains in the collective national memory a quintessential interrogation, revision, and reification of the Dream. In the speech, King returns to the “magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration” to produce present hope to secure future progress by means of present values, which he legitimizes through their past origins. King is able to imagine an American future of interracial equity precisely because his dream is “deeply rooted in the American dream” at large and will come to fruition in the nation’s long-awaited realization of “the true meaning of its creed” that “all men are created equal.”

King’s argument thus relies upon its explicit situation in time and among other points on the American progressive teleological timeline. And yet, even as King engages the teleology to open up the American telos to previously marginalized groups of Americans, the teleological structure allows the freedom to float in a future eternally just out of reach of the present.

While King’s reliance on teleological redemption motivates him and his followers to work for progress on the faith that it will come, his reliance on the redemption narrative form may in fact be what precludes the Dream from ever coming. Or perhaps,

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39 Ibid., 4.
the Dream itself remains a dream because it can never be waking reality.40 This is a rather reductive and not-so-generous reading of King and yet, at the same time, it rehearses a popular Black Power critique of the Civil Rights Movement’s insistence on non-violent reform that seemed to many to be too compliant with the oppressive system and too slow for the change needed.41 Notably for this thesis, this high-stakes tension emerges at the site of narrative analysis in the value of teleological redemption and the different possible time-spaces in which effective social change might occur.

Situated in the midst of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, the field of black theology emerged at this explicit theopolitical intersection of ethical interrogation. James Cone and other eminent black theologians interrogated the problem of black suffering through the traditional and irresolvable theological predicament of theodicy.42 Roughly defined, theodicy asks over and over again the murky question: If you have a God who is by definition omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent, how can there be evil in the world? One resolution to this problem is that of “vicarious suffering”: because Jesus suffered we must suffer too, so suffering may be redemptive in and of itself.43 Of course, Cone and his black, womanist, feminist, and other theological compatriots vociferously reject this argument: not only does vicarious suffering justify itself, but it also produces divided categories of “redemptive and non-redemptive suffering” that become difficult to delineate and may easily be mistaken for each other.44

40 King writes in the explicit language of redemption, calling people to “continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive.” (Ibid.)
41 Ashraf Rushdy, “Black Power Context” (class lecture and discussion, ENGL 324: Black Power and the Modern Narrative of Slavery, Wesleyan University, English Department, Middletown, CT, February 7, 2017).
42 Cone, Black Theology.
44 Ibid., 96. See, for example: Delores Williams, Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993); Rebecca Ann Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock, Proverbs of Ashes:
Challenging the “quietism” of redemption in suffering qua suffering, Cone draws from liberation theology, in which God is not simply for all people (i.e., for an elite group naturalized as the “all”) but for the oppressed.\textsuperscript{45} Cone, like his liberation theology peers, situates this in the very narrative fact of the gospels that God did not choose to “become a universal human being”—(whatever that would mean)—“but an oppressed Jew,” and God revealed Godself to humanity through Jewish liberation.\textsuperscript{46} By this logic, freedom is not an innate and static freedom but an active liberation in process: given that “evil is an ever-present possibility in our finite world,” God and humanity must come together in the act of making the future into the present.\textsuperscript{47} As Cone’s claim promotes the universalizing ethos of Christianity by means of work in the particular present—as in the almost proverbial “no one is free until all are free”—it also situates freedom in time, in process, and in paradox.\textsuperscript{48} Cone’s reworking of the redemptive teleology succeeds in some regards, and yet, as William R. Jones points out with great concern, its ethics may not hold up under further prodding. Insofar as such a black theology frames itself through liberation, its redemptive overcoming of oppression structurally necessitates oppression in the first place. Jones worries that a black theology of liberation might inevitably snowball into justifying slavery itself. Cones and Jones’ grappling with theodicy forces us to ask (and answer carefully in a different project…) whether black theology’s work to make redemptive sense out of African American suffering to be overcome in


\textsuperscript{45} Jones, \textit{Is God a White Racist?}, 95.

\textsuperscript{46} Cone, \textit{Black Theology}, 86.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 141.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 88.
time fails necessarily itself because of redemption’s structural failure to respond ethically to trauma.

Working in the newly coined theoretical subfield of Afro-Pessimism, Frank Wilderson argues that because blackness is constructed as “social death,” black people are precluded from redemption altogether. By social death, he means that the category of “Blackness” functions as the inverse of “Humanity,” borne in the context of African American slavery in which to be black meant to be continually dehumanized property under constant physical threat. Wilderson argues that black people experience a different mode of dehumanization than other subaltern subjects. Whereas the colonized and workers are forced to exchange land or labor for their human dignity, the dehumanization of black people solely “saturates” them with the social death of blackness to prop up white humanity. Unlike the postcolonial or Marxist subject, there can be no “futurity” of a re-humanized blackness they can reclaim in postcolonial efforts because black people arbitrarily grouped under the powerful metaphor of blackness have no position to which they can collectively return.

Wilderson’s definition of blackness mirrors prominent theories of trauma as irreconcilable void, in which trauma’s challenge to linear healing is that there is no state to which to return, no way of undoing the nonevent that is trauma. Like trauma, blackness constructed this way cannot possibly fit into the narrative structure of redemption, implicitly understood here as a Christian-inherited narrative that returns the fallen to their original state of grace. Insofar as Wilderson reveals the impossibility of

49 Ibid.
51 See, for example, Grisekda Pollock, “Art/Trauma/Representation,” Parallax 15, no. 1 (2009): 42.
black redemption, he leaves the teleological redemption narrative intact rather than examining its mechanism and the politics of the narrative form itself. Only by maintaining the redemption narrative form is Wilderson able to take his pessimistic position: the possibility of moving forward fails because there is only one path presented here that structurally can never work. This logic would be equivalent to the claim that Christian progressive teleology is the only way to move forward, so its failure means that we are all irrevocably stuck.

We also saw this problem in the more hopeful narrative revisions by King and Cone as well as in Jones’ critique, all of which attempt to reconcile the disparity between the (very Christian) American Dream and the lived realities of Black Americans without deconstructing the redemption narrative form itself. While Wilderson’s and others’ pessimism might accurately reflect the ontological predicament at hand, there may also be ways of thinking through the narrative mechanics of traumatic redemption that can pose new questions about nonlinear narrative possibilities while keeping in mind the very real consequences of how these narratives are understood.

Structure and Methodology

This thesis examines narratives of redemption at the hearts of Christianity, the American Dream, and trauma studies and identifies resonating concepts among these triangulated fields. When confronted with trauma that cannot simply go away or fade into the past, Christian theologians and American progressive thinkers must reimagine redemption to account for both the non-linear time of traumatic narratives and the ethical imperative to respond to traumatic suffering. Having sketched out our spatiotemporal setting(s) in which trauma challenges teleology, we can begin to think
through the mechanisms of redemption that emerge in different nodules of these inter-
resonating disciplines.

Chapter One begins by tracing the formal properties of trauma (as spatial, dynamic, and spectral) through a survey of trauma studies literature. Thinking of trauma as a mechanical nonlinear form, this chapter seeks to denaturalize the popular medicalized trauma narrative that reduces trauma to the disordered inverse of an impossible cure. Teleological narratives of healing start to fall apart under the microscope of Derridean deconstruction, revealing cultural anxieties about trauma’s challenges to absolute order and linear time. As this chapter argues for a deconstruction of traumatic healing that opens up its dialectical complexities, it takes seriously the necessity for pragmatic responses to traumatic suffering and the practical value of healing measures. This chapter aims to explicate and hold the complexities of traumatic redemption narratives, setting the terms and raising the stakes as we turn to two different modes of ethical response in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter Two picks up with redemption’s formal and ethical problems to work through contemporary theologians’ attempts to rethink redemption so that it can account for individual and/or cultural trauma. Insofar as trauma interrupts narrative, these modes of redemption respond to this problem by reorienting themselves to three different points in time. Whereas the future-oriented theologians offer teleologies that promise an impossible cure, and the past-oriented theologians reconstruct origins that swallow up their traumatic presents, the third cluster reimagines traumatic redemption from the perspective of the present. Looking from this dynamic middle, these theologians propose narratives of traumatic redemption that happen in ongoing processes of interconnection, remembering, and opening of possibilities.
Chapter Three takes up the vocabulary of narrative theory in a close reading of Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me* to examine the narrative forms of the American Dream and its alternatives. This chapter argues that by looking at the spatiotemporal structures of the book’s textual discourse we can see how Coates proposes an alternative to linear redemption not only in his explicit claims but also at the level of his narrative form. Whereas the simplified content of Coates’ anti-Dream statements may fall into a kind of nihilism, the book’s multi-chronotopic form reimagines the mechanics of redemption. This opened-up redemption of what Coates terms “the Struggle” effectively deconstructs the dialectics of trauma that otherwise retain their binaries in the trauma studies and theological works that ground Chapters One and Two.

I argue that both trauma (as it is theorized) and redemption are intrinsically narrative concerns, especially in the United States texts that I examine, and that close attention to their narrative mechanics denaturalizes the worldviews that they maintain and reveals the political content of their forms themselves. The methodology that drives this thesis arises from my years of studied attention to metaphor and its mode of playfully opening up meaning that destabilizes the singularity, flatness, and hopeful absolutism of the “literal.” We often think about the figurative and the literal in juxtaposition as we imagine metaphorical language to be excessive, flowery abstraction from the essential truth of literal reality. Trauma, however, presents a particularly obvious case against this figurative/literal binary because its alleged referent vanishes from sight, having never really been there at all: trauma is not its originary event; it has

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no singular narrative, no truth, no solution per se. As we will see in Chapter One and throughout this thesis, a theoretical hazard of trauma studies lies in its obsession with trauma as void, the non-subject that eagerly lures us into thinking that there is some underlying “real” into which we can think our way. Instead of finding this “real” and resolving the conceptual conflict—an irresolvable teleology if ever there were one—we are left instead to examine strands of meaning, affect, and dynamics as we think through the narrative meshwork and meshwork narratives of trauma.

I have read and reread my triangulated subject matter—of Christianity, trauma, and the Dream—for the residues of resonances that vibrate among these imbricated fields. I am speaking in part through William Connolly here, who theorizes world systems like global capitalism as “resonance machine[s]” in which various open systems collide and co-evolve through their metaphoric resonances across space-time that alter forms in irrevocable ways, sometimes subtly and sometimes catastrophically.53 The activities of these resonance machines can never be absolutely predicted or used to definitively map out future events. The unfolding of events in time is irreversible insofar as their contributing factors are too many to narrate forward or backwards in a linear stream. Connolly’s resonance metaphor evokes the elusive mechanics of trauma, both in the haunting of trauma’s dynamic half-presences and in the multiplied and unexpected forms of trauma’s aftermath. It is often futile to reduce the mess of everything to a “real” or underlying structure. Attuned to resonances instead, this thesis identifies trends in traumatic narrative clusters through close attention to a few layers of this complex machine.

CHAPTER ONE

TRAUMA MECHANICS AND
THE ETHICS OF REDEMPTION

Proposing a Definitional Matrix

As it feels its way into the slippery narrative forms of trauma, this thesis requires some sort of working definition of “trauma” that, given its very nature, will quickly shapeshift into something other than a straightforward definition. Trauma is generally defined as a blow to the physical body or the psyche, an event that is so violent and sudden that it cannot be fully processed in the moment and so returns through hauntings and other intrusive phenomena. Trauma, it is said, can never be fully known in the normative sense of cognitive processing and thus functions in an alternate space of memory and experience that requires new theoretical frameworks to understand. The category of trauma webs its way through a variegated range of experiences—of individuals, collectives, and cultures with various causes and effects—that are connected but not reducible to a set collection of phenomena under one terminological umbrella. Moreover, the qualities that all traumas seem to share elude stability themselves: traumas are often described (i.e., constructed) as unknowable and unspeakable, both absent and present, rupturing assumed-to-be-stable cognitive norms, and manifesting in a variety of ways depending on the events, experiences, and survivors. Thus, a functional definition of trauma for our purpose here must acknowledge the flexibility, variety, inconsistency, and gaps that comprise its unexpected ontology.

Thinking with this eye toward fragmentation and flux, it is paramount that we be attentive to the sneaky slippage between trauma and what we might call the broader “postmodern condition.” Postmodern and post-structuralist thinkers have spent over half a century pushing back against the Enlightenment-inherited *modus operandi* of extrapolating universal truths and hierarchical systems of order from the stuff of our world. According to the postmodernist, this universalizing logic not only fails to account for the complexities of our meshwork world, but it also actively props up systems of oppression by promoting the interests of the elite (affluent, white, European, male, etc.) that masquerade as those of the essentialized all of “humanity.” Postmodernism’s push to particularize the “all” reads the world as fragmentary, multiple, non-linear, and tangled, which in turns deconstructs the “self” into a constantly shifting entity co-constructed with its lifeworld.

A hazard of trauma studies thus arises in the elision of these two languages of fragmentation, which we might avoid if we think about these distinct categories as they come into conversation. The collapse of trauma into chaos not only glorifies suffering but fails the very complexity of trauma; chaos, after all, is distinguished as non-differentiation, an absolute annihilation that slips into the soothing images of “fluidity.” As this chapter looks to complicate the binary of dis/order, postmodernism can provide helpful language to think about trauma’s form without validating its fragmentation as the “way things are” just as it denaturalizes teleologies of impossible order.

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56 Sally Bachner, “Introduction” (class discussion, ENGL 213: Contemporary British and American Fiction, Wesleyan University, English Department, Middletown, CT, February 1, 2017); on the elision of trauma studies and postmodernism, see Bachner, “Introduction,” in *The Prestige of Violence* (Atlanta, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011).
Throughout this chapter, we must be wary of trauma studies’ two most popular pitfalls: the reductiveness of medical models of trauma that seek to solve its problems and the glorification of trauma in the postmodern endeavor to evade sense-making.\footnote{Mary-Jane Rubenstein articulates a version of this claim in her forward to \textit{Trauma and Transcendence: Limits of Theory and Prospects in Thinking}, ed. Eric Boynton and Peter Capretto (New York: Fordham University Press, forthcoming).} While this chapter critiques medicalized teleologies of traumatic healing as narratives that misrepresent trauma and thus fail to respond to trauma on its own terms, it must likewise avoid a simplistic reading that mistakes trauma for the postmodern condition and forgets that trauma entails suffering. Additionally, trauma employed as a theoretical category sometimes overgeneralizes its referents in an attempt to speak more clearly about trauma or some part of its mechanism. As soon as an argument defines the category of trauma conclusively, one’s suspicions should be roused. Rather than quickly determining a definition to apply to a case study, we will spend this chapter lingering in the narrative forms and dynamics that emerge in trauma’s definitions to more carefully consider how trauma works. The definitional matrix that emerges will provide tools for us to consider the dialectical, temporal, and ethical concerns that representations of traumatic healing rouse. We will need to consider all sides of this debate as we grapple with the ethical incentive to narrate healing for trauma that can never be cured, which underlies Christian theological and American progressive responses to trauma.

\textbf{Genealogies, Margins, Specters}

We will provisionally build this definitional matrix through a few trauma theorists who reveal three crucial characteristics of trauma and trauma studies’ forms. Through Ruth Leys’ genealogical language, trauma expands into a spatialized meshwork that
cannot be reduced to a singular definition or linear narrative. Ann Cvetkovich’s explication of the processes in the middles and margins of the traumatized archive reveals the dynamic motion of trauma in the unpredictable flux of its meshwork machine. In Pollock’s reimagined grammar of representation, trauma’s mobility carries into the spectral and verb-oriented being that opens up the all-or-nothing absence or presence of the stable noun-form. Read together, these three perspectives offer a definition of trauma that is characterized by its spatial, dynamic, and spectral forms.

Ruth Leys’ “genealogical approach to the study of trauma” suspends trauma’s definitions in spatial relation by tracing the ways that the concept has been constructed and studied without simply determining what “trauma” is. Genealogy itself maps ancestry (of a person, word, field of study, etc.) through a fractal set of relationships that move out, across, and interactively as much as they move “back” through predecessors and “forward” through descendants. The branches that make up the genealogy arrange events that happened in time in a multi-dimensional plane, no longer reducible to a one-dimensional timeline. A genealogy is constructed from a particular perspective (often from the present moment) but designed to be read by shifting through the different perspectives of its vertices.

Following a similar logic, Leys’ book aims to “situate trauma’s dilemmas, impasses, and controversies” in multivalent relation, avoiding the popular but oversimplified “linear” narrative of trauma’s evolution that misrepresents the field’s history. In her introduction, Leys initially sketches out contemporary notions of psychological trauma through late nineteenth-century European psychology, Freudian

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58 Leys, Trauma: A Genealogy, 8.
59 Ibid.
psychoanalysis, and the increased attention to shell shock and the psychological suffering of war veterans that led to official recognition of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in 1980. Pushing against this prominent linear narrative, however, Leys’ subsequent chapters work through what she deems “crucial episodes in the ongoing if interrupted attempt by various physicians to define the nature of trauma” to better focus on each and compare them on varying terms. These coalescences of historical moments, themselves “irruptive” and inconclusive, alter the movements of trauma studies rather than building toward some post-ordained trajectory of “continuously unfolding historical development.”

Leys’ rethinking of trauma both provides a more careful understanding of trauma’s history as a history and speaks it through the divergent, fractured, and irreducible language of trauma itself.

Ann Cvetkovich maps the motive topography of archival processes, interacting disciplines, and traumatic gaps in her *Archive of Feelings* dynamically reconfiguring and de-configuring matrix of study. Seeking a more radical disruption of narrowly medicalized notion of trauma than Leys, Cvetkovich entangles trauma and queer studies to push against the boundaries that constrain both and to map the dynamic topography of trauma’s archival processes, interdisciplinary forms, and gaps. The appeal of trauma as theoretical frame lies for Cvetkovich in the way that it decenters, multiplies, and connects artificially stratified human experiential categories of “psychic” and “physical” and of “politics and emotion,” and, in doing so, provides “a name for experiences of socially-situated political violence.” By working within marginalized, everyday, and

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60 Ibid., 17.
61 Leys links this claim to Michel Foucault’s genealogical approach to history (Ibid., 8).
highly varied “sites of lesbian public cultures,” Cvetkovich further challenges the assumption of trauma as solely “geopolitical catastrophe” that collapses its variety, eclipsing the “affective experiences” of lesser-explored traumas and people other than direct survivors “whose experiences” nonetheless “circulate in the vicinity of trauma and are marked by it.”

Cvetkovich’s attention to the marginal fleshes out her titular archival project, particularly in the way in which “trauma puts pressure on conventional forms of documentation, … giving rise to new genres of expression” and further explication of the mechanics of the archive. In its attempts to record history accurately, completely, and permanently the archive as theoretical category and material process inevitably raises questions about its own subjectivity and incompleteness. Likewise, trauma disrupts notions of complete and reliable memory and consequently necessitates new ways of thinking about the relationship between past events and present experience. Cvetkovich disrupts dominant notions of archive and catastrophe by showing how the “margins” to which she attends actually become something else, and the archive takes on some other shape. Cvetkovich’s turn to the margins does not reify a singular center-periphery model, as it would if she simply assimilated lesbian and queer sites within the purview of trauma studies. Instead, the topography of her project expands and warps as she enumerates the “marginal, idiosyncratic, and sometimes unexpected sites” of vastly differing yet thoroughly imbricated disciplines, media, and stresses. These “histories … ‘touch’ one

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63 Ibid., 3.
64 Ibid., 7.
65 For example, Cvetkovich speaks about the “catastrophic and widely public” traumas of war, American racism, the AIDS crisis, and more as well as “persistent[ly] invisib[le]” and often gendered sexual trauma. While sexual trauma has often been equated with catastrophic trauma to gain social and scholarly legitimacy, Cvetkovich argues that it deserves its own space, record, and language as its own form of trauma and experience. (Ibid., 3.)
another,” colliding and resonating to rematerialize this matrix of edges that is itself edgeless. As these nodes reach out to each other they contract, expand, and twist the spatiotemporal fabric into which they are woven. Thinking through Cvetkovich, we can add this temporal dynamism into the spatialized genealogy that Leys proposes to consider traumatic aftermath in terms of its space-time setting.

Griselda Pollock probes this multiplying form as she works through the semi-irrevocable problem of incomplete traumatic representation by closely attending to its “grammar,” which she characterizes as the material structures of time and space in which trauma manifests.66 Both absent and present, trauma is not quite representable in a traditional sense of one-to-one meaning conveyance (“x happened” represents the happening of x). Instead, Pollock describes traumatic representation in physical terms as the “pla[cing of] an apprehensible form within the structures of time, that is, inside the grammar of representation … to endow it with a presence” that gives “the effect of representation” even as it can never make fully present the spectral trauma that is “perpetually present” in its “permanent absence.”67 Because trauma is something more than its inciting event (which in some cases may never have happened at all), the task of representing trauma is not simply one of reproducing a distinct and stable past event. Traumatic representation instead “assume[s] some kind of time and space” in which the fluctuation forms of trauma quite literally figure.68 This haunting quality of trauma exists in a Bakhtinian time-space not subject to the mutually exclusive “either-or” of absence.

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66 Pollock, “Art/Trauma/Representation,” 40.
67 Ibid., 42.
68 Ibid., 43. This language is partially inspired by Paul Ricoeur’s theory of metaphor as a “ ‘figure of speech’ ” in which “discourse assumes the nature of a body by displaying forms and traits. … By providing a kind of figurability to the message, the tropes make discourse appear,” blurring the categorical boundaries of the metaphorical and the literal in this materializing (“The Metaphorical Process of Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling,” Critical Inquiry 5, no. 1 [1978]: 144.)
and presence. A spectral form, trauma pulls together threads of the past, different physical spaces, events, and affects into the presently experienced moment and the broadly conceptualized collectivity of memory. Trauma eludes representation only when “representation” is contingent upon linear time and singular reality; however, a grammar of spatialized and spectral time provides a material in which traumatic representation can occur on alternate terms.

Trauma arises in the verbal structures of this grammar, making connections even as stable nouns elude it. The characteristic “shapeless[ness]” of trauma does not preclude its very existence but instead is what produces its powerful “shaping affects [sic]” on the terrain of the traumatic lifeworld. Pollock visualizes this impact in her metaphorical description of trauma in “the resonating circles around [an] invisible stone dropped into the fathomable pond of the not-yet-psyche.” The “invisible stone” holds the place of the alleged inciting traumatic event that is typically inaccessible, if not altogether more complex than a single originary event. The metaphorical ripples capture the dynamics of traumatic aftermath, spreading through and altering the textures of memory, experience, and the social organization of the world. The shared water of the ripples and the “pond” of the mind imbricates the physical properties of matter and movement. The mind, of course, is not merely passive matter upon which external forces act but an entity that entails its own dynamics, whether understood poetically or through the mechanics of neuroscience.

Likewise, the “resonating circles” of traumatic aftermath have substance—albeit a spectral one—because they are made of and through water. Pollock’s watery metaphor

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69 Ibid., 45.
70 Ibid.
avoids the trap of defining trauma as void, a metaphor that indicates a stable non-object that retains its illusory thing-ness each time the void is deemed “not a thing.”

Attuned to dynamics instead, Pollock’s metaphor helps us imagine trauma that works like a Connollian resonance machine, which begins to articulate traumatic forms rather than merely fetishize trauma’s alleged locations in the gaps of language and the knowable.

Thinking in terms of rippling resonances not only fleshes out trauma’s “shapeless[ly] … shaping” form, but it also expands the category of the knowable as our knowledge of trauma fluctuates in the “perpetual presence” of its “permanent absence.”

The metaphorics of trauma are helpful in broadening the concept’s scope and inviting further scrutiny into the knotty corners of trauma’s spatial, dynamic, and spectral manifestations. It is key, however, that we remember that this metaphor-oriented approach need not glorify and romanticize traumatic suffering which is, we must not forget, suffering. These poetic registers do not smooth over traumatic pain but reveal the forms and questions embedded in its complexity. Metaphor attunes us to the mechanics of form, responding to the imbricated questions of how trauma and representation work. Metaphor’s continual creativity primes this chapter’s mode of reading traumatic healing as a narrative that requires close attention and revision. This formal approach calls into question the normative categories of stability, order, and reality themselves and requires

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71 This defining through negation parallels the logic of apophasis—also known as apophasic theology or negative theology—which Mary-Jane Rubenstein defines as “literally a theology of un-saying” that works as “a strategy of reaching the limits of language in order to transcend them, becoming united to the God who exceeds all human determinations (including the distinctions of light and dark, presence and absence, and nearness and farness)” (“The Fire Each Time,” 168). Comparing the functions of negation in trauma studies and theology raises new stakes in their strangely related attempts to articulate the non-stuff in the gaps of language. On the relationship between apophasis and Derridean deconstruction, see Rubenstein, “Unknow Thyself: Apophasicism, Deconstructionism, and Theology After Ontotheology,” Modern Theology 19, no. 3 (2003): 387-417.

72 See Introduction, 25.

73 Ibid., 45, 42.
greater attention to the grammar of traumatic representation and the formal possibilities of non-linear healing and redemption.

**Dialectical Trauma**

Questions of form arise not only in interdisciplinary literary theories of trauma, as might be expected of narratology, but they also play a central role in psychological branches of trauma studies whose primary aim is to construct effective narratives of healing. Analyses of trauma engage form on at least two key levels: that of the trauma itself as it is described and that of the analytical narrative in which it is described and its ontological implications. We have seen this doubling already in the relationships between trauma and representation, and trauma theory and postmodern thought. While prominent psychological models explicitly attend to trauma’s alternative structure as they delineate its symptoms, these models remain to some degree within the context of the dominant worldview of psychological and social order from which trauma is said to deviate. As the archetypically “unrepresentable” and “unspeakable,” trauma cannot be expressed in normal structures of language; and yet those very terms depend upon their norms even as their “un-”s claim to negate the traditional confines of representation and speech. This irresolvable conflict takes us into the murky territory of dialectical thinking, which both psychological and poststructuralist thinkers utilize to unpack the complexities of traumatic un/representation.

Written for both clinical and lay readers, Judith Herman’s 1992 book *Trauma and Recovery* outlines psychological trauma precisely through these dynamic contradictions that construct it and the politics of its un/representation. In what has become a core text for the interdisciplinary field, Herman seeks to articulate the “unspeakable” both as an
essential quality of traumatic experience itself (compared to easily representable experiences) and in her political project of voicing that which has been forcibly silenced. Herman begins her introduction by expressing one of a number of trauma’s paradoxes: “the ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness,” and yet “atrocities … refuse to be buried.”74 This doubled desire to “deny” and “proclaim” traumatic events constitutes what Herman calls the “central dialectic of psychological trauma;” this bifurcation recurs in the way that traumatic memories that are alternately “relived” and repressed, and how trauma must be must be spoken and yet remain to some degree unspeakable.75 It is this dialectical relationship, according to Herman, that “gives rise to complicated, sometimes uncanny alterations of consciousness” that can be experienced both by direct victims and witnesses in an Orwellian “doublethink.”76

Talking seriously about the paradoxes of trauma opens up their seeming nonsense to the complex forms of dialectics. A dialectical relationship can be defined as the identification and opposition of two concepts or positions in a binary that sets them in never-ending conversation with each other, thus disrupting the stability of the binary in the first place and calling for a more nuanced approach to the logic at hand. Initially deemed abnormal, trauma calls into question what constitutes a “normal” way of processing; making sense of the “disorder” of trauma likewise complicates simplistic assumptions of “order.” Despite this complicating motion, these conceptual pairs risk shoring up their initial oppositions if the dialectic is explicated in service of maintaining the primacy of one term. Trauma configured as dis-order paves a path back to order, which may seem helpful for healing (defined as such) but fails to engage trauma on its

74 Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 2.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid., 3, 2.
own terms, thus failing to respond to the trauma itself. In place of modeling healing on this trauma-eluding binary, a deconstructive method of analysis engages the dialectic’s structural resistance of the static binary, working through the between space of the slash in dis/order where trauma resides.

Jacques Derrida’s “general strategy of deconstruction” famously engages the precision necessary in dialectical thinking as it tries to “avoid both simply neutralizing … binary oppositions… and simply residing within the closed field of these oppositions, thereby confirming it.” This process is motivated by the fact that the binaries it seeks to overturn are not merely equal pairs but pairs set within “a violent hierarchy,” which can be overturned (Derrida argues) precisely through its metaphysical deconstruction. To skip this process of deconstruction in a radical move away from the hierarchy (the attempted “neutralization’”), for Derrida, fails in its intended endeavor by leaving the oppressive binary intact. Because “the hierarchy of dual oppositions always reestablishes itself,” the deconstructionist agenda necessitates a structural position that continually agitates the binary. The problem, though, persists in that while rejecting the original system too quickly fails the deconstructive method, “to remain in this phase is still to operate on the terrain of and from within the deconstructed system.” This work thus requires a “double gesture” or “writing that is in and of itself multiple,” which continues to multiply in order to destabilize the two-ness of the original binary. This exponential doubling—“precisely stratified” insofar as it is “dislodged and dislodging”—draws attention to the “interval between inversion … and the irruptive emergence of a new ‘concept’ … [not] included in the previous regime.” By focusing on this between-ness, Derrida’s deconstructive method productively engages dialectical pairs, whose seeming
opposition disrupts itself through the interplay of various threads that resist the original dichotomous hierarchy.\textsuperscript{77,78}

Derrida’s deconstructive method seems a radical departure in its efforts to agitate the reverse-entropy of power structures against which Derrida warns, but its power lies precisely in its giving voice to the already disruptive nature of these dialectical relationships that resist the oversimplification of an oppressive binary worldview. Order and disorder, in this paradigm, are not essential categories but rather socially constructed ones whose realities reveal themselves to be much more complicated through analysis. Through this lens, the “paradoxes” of trauma are no longer simply paradoxic insofar as their contradictions would fail to make “logical” sense;\textsuperscript{79} instead, trauma’s dialectical ontology resists simplistic and hierarchical models of logic and calls for a new means of representation. While trauma presents a problem for the model of straightforward representation that it eludes, celebrating the dialectical form through Derridean deconstruction opens trauma up to different understandings through its hybrid expression and inexpressibility.

\textsuperscript{78} Derrida’s deconstructionism opens up linear time in a “phase” that is not “chronological” but “structural,” so it cannot be simply completed as in a step-by-step process. This agitating phase not only requires persistence but also a rethinking of the temporality of the process itself. (Ibid.)
\textsuperscript{79} A closer examination of the various definitions of “paradox” reveals the term’s vexed relationship with truth claims: (1) “an apparently absurd or self-contradictory statement or proposition, or a strongly counter-intuitive one, which investigation, analysis, or explanation may nevertheless prove to be well-founded or true;” (2) “a proposition or statement that is (taken to be) actually self-contradictory, absurd, or intrinsically unreasonable;” (3) “Logic. An argument, based on (apparently) acceptable premises and using (apparently) valid reasoning, which leads to a conclusion that is against sense, logically unacceptable, or self-contradictory;” (4) “A person or thing whose life or behavior is characterized by paradox; a paradoxical phenomenon or occurrence, spec. one that exhibits some contradiction or conflict with preconceived notions of what is reasonable or possible.” (“paradox, n. and adj.”, \textit{OED Online}, Oxford University Press, March 2017, accessed April 13, 2016, http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.wesleyan.edu/view/Entry/137353?rskey=C11g3M&result=1&isAdvanced=false)
Psychological trauma oriented toward a goal of healing, however, tells the story of the dialectic another way: trauma fractures experiences into unstable pairs that perpetuate their binary opposition and that therapeutic treatment may resolve. It perhaps goes without saying that trauma’s disruptive nature is dangerous for stable, normal health and that returning to such a version of health would require identifying trauma in order to annihilate it. Thus, in addition to the internal dialectics that characterize traumatic experience (e.g., absence/presence, ab/normality, etc.) the psychological healing narrative configures a meta-dialectic of trauma opposed to the norm that is designed to resolve itself: if trauma is simply dis-order and thus an undoing of order, identifying its problems may provide a roadmap back to order, solving the otherwise unsolvable. While Herman’s trauma-as-dialectic sustains itself in traditional dialectical fashion—an opposition that complicates and thus suspends itself, continually undoing and redoing itself—her politics of healing seeks to resolve that dialectical unraveling by making possible trauma’s fuller representation in an implicitly teleological project.

Here we see that healing produces a major conceptual and ethical problem. On the one hand, the very nature of the dialectic according to Derrida is that it can never be resolved and instead requires deconstruction to undo its underlying hierarchy. On the other hand, the purpose of healing is to resolve the confusion of the dialectic to end suffering, often in a way that aids marginalized people and disrupts power structures that exacerbate traumatic suffering. Both the internal dialectics of trauma and the meta-dialectic of dis/order raise complex questions about how best to construct narrative responses to trauma. The choice between deconstructive and medically reconstructive approaches is an ethically loaded one. Rather than make this choice here, this chapter
will continue to unpack and attend to these complexities as we go on to consider the narrative-time forms of trauma and traumatic healing.

**Traumatic Time**

This meta-dialectical framework underlies many prominent interventions into trauma, particularly in the flattened healing narrative inscribed by popular articulations of PTSD. Indicating a nodal point in her genealogy, Leys describes how the legitimation of the PTSD diagnosis in 1980 marked a significant shift in trauma studies, as it provided a heading under which an array of symptoms could be consolidated in order to be ameliorated, reconfiguring the various projects comprising trauma studies through the universalizing, sense-making model of PTSD. While Leys acknowledges the value of identifying “certain continuities” among traumatic experiences, she takes issue with the degree to which the psychological community “present[s] PTSD as a timeless diagnosis, the culmination of a lineage that is seen to run from the past to the present in an interrupted yet ultimately continuous way.” Despite the undeniably invaluable contributions of the PTSD diagnosis to the field, Leys points to two particular problems here: firstly, the illusory construction of a panacea to the variety of experiences distorted under the taxonomy of “trauma” that evades that very variety; and secondly, the convenient progression toward this perceived cure-all that collapses the spatiotemporal

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complexity of its genealogy, likewise evading the actual concerns of trauma and its study.  

The problem of time – how it moves, is perceived, and is remembered – recurs again and again, framing much of the trauma studies project insofar as traumatic experience seems to challenge “normal” temporality, or rather the normalized narrative of irreversible, linear, rational time. “Fundamentally a disorder of memory,” PTSD, as Leys paraphrases it, encapsulates:

the idea … that, owing to the emotions of terror and surprise caused by certain events, the mind is split or dissociated: it is unable to register the wound to the psyche because the ordinary mechanisms of awareness and cognition are destroyed. … The experience of trauma, fixed or frozen in time, refuses to be represented as past, but is perpetually reexperienced in a painful, dissociated, traumatic present.

Leys’ description highlights at once the problems of temporality in the narrative of traumatic experience as it is often conceived, particularly in the way that trauma disrupts the assumption that time and our tellings of it ought to happen linearly. Since time is typically defined as a singular irreversible stream, we are led to expect (or rather, to hope almost explicitly in vain) that events will occur neatly in order and that our following memories will ideally reflect that objective structure. A temporality other than this one, as in trauma, thus appears by extension to be a deviation and a problem rather than an alternate temporal possibility. The “split[ting]” of the “mind” denoted here primarily hinders the ability to “register” or know that trauma – that is, to integrate the particular event into a definitive narrative of the past that informs but is distinct from the present.

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82 On the cultural fascination with the cure as a normative fantasy of fixing alleged problems as well as the possible alternatives of non-teleological existing, see Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Care* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

83 Elizabeth Freeman calls this dominant temporal ontology “chrononormativity.” *(Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* [Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2010], 3.)


85 Ibid.
A closer look at this assumption that trauma disrupts normal cognitive processes reveals an underlying ontological concern about the way in which trauma threatens the rigid delineation of past, present, and future of normalized cognition. In the temporal model that concerns (and constructs) PTSD, trauma incites dialectic oppositions that subsequently must be resolved, implying both the existence of a prior, originary, balanced mental state and a future return to the state of balance in an ultimate restoration of order. Despite or because of the temporal confusion of traumatic experience that intermingles memories of past and present, trauma defined this way becomes neatly situated in a present bounded by its stable past and future. No matter how messy in and of itself, traumatic experience becomes (seemingly) controllable through its translation into a redemptive narrative defined by its linear conflict-resolution structure.

Trauma understood through redemption explicitly returns us to this thesis’ inciting project of examining the narrative mechanics of traumatic redemption at the nexus of Christian and American progressive thought. The conflict-resolution structure gives redemption the surface effect of having control over the uncontrollable by setting temporal and thematic limits: the story’s content and split into chaos and order, and the chaos is then shoehorned into the position of temporary conflict that springs up from previous order at the origin and must be resolved in order to conclude the story. This conflict-resolution form is actually a rather standard logic through which we (at least, mainstream Western thinkers) often frame fictional stories. All sorts of thinkers have codified this logic, from Aristotle to the twentieth century folklorist Vladimir Propp to television writer and producer Dan Harmon. A classic fairytale begins with a stable “initial situation” after which the action begins as the prince and princess meet, want to
marry, encounter an obstacle that separates the lovers, and must fight their way back to each other so that, at the end of the story, all conflicts are resolved as the two are married happily ever after. Likewise, Harmon’s universalizing circle structure of storytelling begins with the introduction of a stable protagonist who then encounters a desire that launches them into the action of the story until they learn something and return to stability as a slightly changed version of themself. The Christian cosmology often reads as one big conflict-resolution arc: in the beginning there was just God, then God created the world and expelled Adam and Eve from paradise, instigating a profusion of sinful conflict that necessitated Christ’s coming to earth and promise of salvation that would come at the apocalyptic end of the conflict-driven universe. We see this redemption trope explicitly in Mikhail Bakhtin’s formula of “guilt → punishment → redemption → blessedness” that moves characters through the popular metamorphic arc of certain generic types. It almost goes without saying that everyday life does not work this way, in part because life keeps going—we all die, of course, but in an interwoven world system of narratives that do not neatly reach their ends as bounded fictional plots do. And yet, even as secularist psychologists (and many theologians too) likely agree that life is not plotted per se, the resonating narrative structure of conflict-resolution influences their and our understandings of real-life traumatic suffering, transfiguring it into a temporary monolithic disorder that distracts us from the actual story shapes of trauma.

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89 Bakhtin, “Forms of Time,” 118.
This redemption narrative trope finds its way into prominent theories of psychological trauma as well. In an essay on “The Black Hole of Trauma” that opens their 2006 collection on *Traumatic Stress*, psychologists Bessel van der Kolk and Alexander McFarlane explicate trauma through a redemptive model of healing disorder in linear time, which they frame through numerous dialectical pairs and the key redemptive act of naming. As in Leys’ genealogy but with a different disciplinary motivation, van der Kolk and McFarlane describe how the monumental PTSD diagnosis gave the psychological community and trauma survivors a name by which they could identify symptoms. This “formal … validation” allows survivors to “make sense of what they are going through, instead of feeling ‘crazy’ and forsaken.” Rather than having their subjectivity subsumed into the divergent, “irrationa[l]” chaos of trauma that is irrevocably opposed to pure order, PTSD as condition rather than identity allows survivors to remain fully human subjects moving through temporary symptoms, mere narrative obstructions to the ultimate happily-ever-after of psychological freedom. Central to traumatic healing here is the sense-making endeavor, which requires validation by and connection to the social world. Social legitimation moves trauma survivors out of the conceptual category of “crazy”—whose stigma dehumanizes its referents—and into a category neatly within the structure of psychology and thus of the (representable) real. This ontological shift aims to move the “forsaken” survivors out of isolation and back into the social world by fitting their experiences back into accepted conceptual structures of what it is to be human. 

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90 Van der Kolk and McFarlane, “The Black Hole of Trauma,” 4-5.
91 Ibid., 5.
Naming provides the key redemptive step in the linear narrative that might be construed as follows: (1) the traumatic event occurs, (2) the aftermath of traumatic experience ensues, (3) confusion arises about what this trauma is and how it works, (4) the name PTSD is made available, (5) experiences and symptoms are identified within the PTSD rubric, (6) the healing process, now possible, may and will occur, and (7) resolution of the trauma-induced narrative conflict is ultimately completed. Thinking in terms of this implicit narrative structure, van der Kolk and McFarlane identify naming as the core semiotic act in its capacity to incite theoretical, social, and psychological progressive change; however, this glorification of naming PTSD comes at the unaddressed cost of continually configuring trauma through its orientation to the norm rather than on its own terms.

This emphasis on naming evokes the Christian underpinnings of, or at least resonances with, this dominant Western scientific discourse. Despite the implicitly secular field of psychology to which this essay contributes, its authors explicitly refer to an archetypal moment in the Bible to substantiate their argument that “an experience does not really exist until it can be named and placed into larger categories.” The authors paraphrase God’s giving the first human being Adam dominion over the earth in Genesis 2, explaining that “Adam’s first and main task in Paradise was to give names to the animals” and that “the act of naming made him master over creation” (other than the creator God, who is conveniently erased here). Van der Kolk and McFarlane casually refer to this “biblical mythology” as a bit of cultural trivia, but, of course, these verses on the origin of human power over and responsibility for the earth have been hotly debated
over millennia of Christian theology in order to determine precedents for social order, human behavior, and Western philosophies of subjectivity.\textsuperscript{92, 93}

By analogically linking this story to the naming power given to psychologists and victims alike by PTSD, van der Kolk and McFarlane not only further legitimate PTSD as a “formal category” but also suggest in it the potential to master trauma as a phenomenon of the created world. Trauma is thus firstly configured as part of the chaotic material world designed to be dominated by humanity (under the guidance of the Abrahamic God) and secondly configured as a source of anxiety over our failures to convert all material chaos into divinely appointed order.\textsuperscript{94} Even without invoking God, such a moment in secular psychological discourse exemplifies the lasting impact of this dialectical hierarchy of dis/order contained in a conflict-resolution narrative structure.

It is precisely this conflation of Christian and secular psychological thought that amplifies the reductive redemption plot structure, whose impossible teleology creates a treadmill effect of progress held back by its dissonance with trauma’s incurability. Van der Kolk and McFarlane invoke the Christian language of sin and redemption as they claim that “many survivors” can at least “temporarily” “transcend their trauma … and harness their pain,” citing the artistic projects of Holocaust survivors that temporarily lift their creators out of traumatic suffering in a cyclical motion of transcendence and despair, evoking the mechanism of sin and redemption that moves up and down its vertical axis.\textsuperscript{95, 96} The language of transcendence promises forward motion as long as it

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 4.
  \item \textsuperscript{94} See Keller, \textit{Face of the Deep}.
  \item \textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 4.
  \item \textsuperscript{96} Consider the shape of the sine curve segment of Figure 3. (Introduction, 16.)
\end{itemize}
remains tangled in the preceding fall (or negative starting point) that simultaneously precludes and sustains the fantasy of progress. The pairing of “transcend[ing] trauma” and “harness[ing] pain” links the acts of liberation and captivity, implying that for the positively coded human agent to be free, the negatively coded suffering must be trapped in its place. If the pain of trauma is not eradicated but made captive, and if captivity is a temporary position that includes the possibility of escape, then transcendence does not comprise an irreversible act (from A to B) but an irresolvable process (constantly alternating between the A and B positions): the human agent and the almost-personified pain play a persistent dialectical game in which the two players compete for the liberation spot and the loser gets relegated to the captivity spot. The continual failure to permanently transcend is precisely what sustains the hope of ultimate success after many failed attempts, just as many Christians routinely repent for their sins to clear their slate, only to sin again and constantly repeat the process in the hopes that one day they will stay redeemed without falling back into sin.

The Christian paradigm underlying van der Kolk and McFarlane’s traumatic transcendence is underscored by the corrupting language they use to describe trauma, that points to a force of disorder that corrodes the ideal of healthy order. By defining trauma as a challenge to the “human capacity to survive and adapt,” trauma is positioned as the frightening exception to the otherwise inexorable progressive motion of evolutionary history. The danger of trauma lies in the way a “memory of one particular event [may] com[e] to taint all other experiences, spoiling appreciation of the present.”97 As in Leys’ paraphrase of PTSD, this quotation reveals anxiety around the past’s potential to corrupt the present and future and to disrupt the easy succession of linear

97 Ibid.
time. The “tyrannical” past is coded as a corruptive antagonist against the positive human agent who seeks an unburdened present and future.\(^98\) The conceptual problem of trauma is not in the occurrence of the violent event itself (which, in this paradigm, happens conclusively in linear, irreversible time) but in its effect on memory and thus on the temporal order itself. This particular description of traumatic disruption is not only of instantaneous shattering but of the subtly infectious work of corruption. The metaphors of “tainting” and “spoiling” entail disastrous effects of even the smallest contamination, whose presence insidiously undoes the perfect whole required of purity.

Van der Kolk and McFarlane’s conception of trauma exacerbates the nonlinear mechanics of sin and redemption, invoking a traumatic sin that constantly agitates the purity of psychological health and requires continual intervention that can never quite resolve this dialectical disruption. Van der Kolk and McFarlane utilize the limiting form of the conflict-resolution plot structure in the hopes of reining in trauma, but this mismatch of story-shapes masks the mechanics of trauma rather than responding to trauma on its own formal terms. The implicit conflation of Christian and secular psychological thought amplifies the reductive redemption plot structure and its dissonance with trauma’s complex mechanics. We will see later in Chapter Two the reverse of van der Kolk and McFarlane’s cultural mashup, as a few theologians graft oversimplified trauma psychology onto simplistic models of linear Christian redemption, papering over trauma’s narrative forms.

\(^{98}\) Ibid.
Deconstructing Redemption

Returning to this chapter’s concern with the politics of form, the problematic ethics of healing trauma’s dialectics might lead us to wonder what the value of redemption is at all. If healing reduces the complexity of trauma to binaries of order and disorder and a flattened teleological narrative, neither of which accurately represents the mechanics of traumatic experience, should we give up on thinking redemptively altogether? Prominent thinkers across a number of contemporary disciplines have taken this route: Leo Bersani questions the redemptive power of art by critiquing the conditions that make that question possible and challenging “the notion of art as salvaging somehow damaged experience” through a psychoanalytic lens.99 Robert Meister exposes the self-unfulfilling redemptive structure of contemporary human rights discourse, whose work comes “after evil” and “before justice” in a space that precludes the possibility of justice ever coming.100 Afro-Pessimist Frank Wilderson argues that redemption is impossible for black Americans because, unlike other subaltern identities, the abject construction of blackness precludes any prior state of humanity that might be recovered.101 Lee Edelman rejects redemptive progress narratives that are underlaid by what he terms “reproductive futurism” that reinforces oppressive, heteronormative social order under the ruse of hope (“fighting for the children”).102 Across these resonating fields something messy lingers in redemption itself, namely in its teleologically glorified revisions of past violences that nonetheless persist in (and are even supported by) the silent wake of an illusory better future.

101 Wilderson, “Afro-pessimism and the End of Redemption.”
Elaine Scarry’s seminal theory of pain sets very real stakes for its ethical representation and physical alleviation, but her core argument becomes thorny under the pressure of trauma’s redemption-disrupting form. Scarry structures her theory around the paradox that “having pain” is “the most vibrant example of what it is to ‘have certainty,’ while … ‘hearing about pain’ may exist as the primary model of what it is ‘to have doubt’ [sic].” This lacunal “unsharability” persists in the way that pain eludes verbal expression, “shattering language” and lacking “referential contact”: pain “is not of or for anything.” This dilemma of “inexpressibility” despite pain’s need for expression has weighty “political consequences” : the failure of pain’s “verba[l] representation” prevents its “poli[tica]l representation” and thus any actions to ameliorate suffering. Pain persists on account of its linguistic erasure, as do the power structures that maintain the silent suffering, often systematically experienced by particular groups; however, for Scarry, once “physical pain … finds its voice, it begins to tell a story” that, in turn, makes pain’s “elimination” possible. This ethical incentive to voice pain parallels the larger projects of “making and unmaking the world” that subtitle Scarry’s book. Scarry defines this world-making as a two-part process of “making-up (mental imaging) and making-real (endowing the mental object with a material form),” underlining the extent of war’s destructiveness that encompasses its surface level destruction as well as its ontological undoing of the world. For Scarry, the project of minimizing pain, then, becomes one of re-making the world by extending the possibilities of linguistic expression. Trauma—

104 Ibid., 5.
105 Ibid., 12.
106 Scarry focuses broadly on the dynamics of war and torture, but her theories can be applied to various, particular situations and sociopolitical dynamics. (Ibid.)
107 Ibid., 3, 13.
108 Ibid., 21.
as nonlinear rupture and remainder—complicates this dichotomous, reversible spectrum of in/expressibility upon which Scarry’s argument relies, necessitating a more complicated way of thinking through traumatic representation. Scarry’s identification of paradox entails a logical dilemma that must, yet cannot, be resolved to one consistent truth; thinking through Derrida, however, these paradoxes can instead be read as dialectics whose deconstruction reveals new conceptual forms. Scarry reads these paradoxes as dilemmas to be resolved, but through Derrida we might read them instead as dialectics to deconstruct, producing new forms rather than impossible narratives of reconciliation. Insofar as Scarry provides a clear ethical incentive, her argument errs on the side of dangerous oversimplification when applied to the meshwork forms of trauma.

Fearing this tendency to glorify struggle in the decades following the Holocaust, many people grappled acutely with the question of how to best represent the atrocities that had occurred. This momentous collective reflection, accompanied by its motivation of ethical response, led to the resulting paradox integral to representing trauma: not to represent the Holocaust at all would simply erase the memory of its impacts, but to aestheticize the Holocaust through artistic representation might accidentally bring some sort of pleasure from the pain, defeating the purpose of this ethical incentive. Writing on this topic, Theodor Adorno warns against the tendency of aestheticization to “make the unthinkable appear to have some meaning.”

This semiotic movement that he critiques reiterates our pivotal redemptive mechanism that seeks to recompense inexplicable suffering with meaning in order to restore (as much as possible) the well-being of the sufferer. Through Adorno’s perspective, however, the very act of “remov[ing]”

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“something of [the trauma’s] horror” fails the intended function of representation to convey as accurately and effectively as possible the represented reality. Despite its intended ethic, this “transfiguration” distorts its subject. By giving suffering redemptive meaning, transfiguring trauma fails to account for suffering on its own horrific terms and may even vindicate it as an essential part of the narrative or history, doing a great “injustice” to the “victims.”

Adorno’s choice of the word “transfiguration” aligns his argument perhaps inadvertently but in consequential resonance with its Christian cousin. Transfiguration entails a transformation in external appearance that often elevates and glorifies in the process. The word derives from the biblical Transfiguration of Christ, in which the disciples watch Jesus’ figure transform into one shining with divine light and hear God’s disembodied corroboration of Jesus’ divinity. While transfiguration has come to refer to neutral metamorphosis as well (a changing of states in no particular moral direction), it carries the elevating and legitimizing motions of its etymology. By choosing this word Adorno compounds the transformative dilemma of representation—never quite matching the “original” in this act of making it present again—with the ethics of reparative meaning-making in replacing and thus failing to acknowledge the non-meaning of traumatic atrocity. This problem of aestheticization lies in its redemptive structure, or rather, the alleged redemptive structure that cannot materially redeem its referents. By nominally exchanging the non-sense for the preferred stable signification,

110 Ibid.
111 Ibid.
the narratological mechanism produces a teleological narrative arc that cannot possibly align with the traumatic dynamics it tries to represent.

Considering this paradox of ethical representation, Lawrence Langer suggests that art can avoid Adorno’s forewarned trap of “transfiguration” by “disfiguring” “empirical reality” instead. Langer characterizes this disfiguration as “the conscious and deliberate alienation of the reader’s sensibilities from the world of the usual and familiar.” This process of “contrived disorientation” not only “eliminates” “the possibility of aesthetic pleasure” at the crux of Adorno’s ethical concern, but it also starts to approximate the mechanisms of traumatic experience. Drawing from the “grotesque” and the “senseless,” Langer’s suggested method disrupts and discomfits the reader in order to situate them within the rupturous ontology of traumatic experience. Unlike the transfiguration that aims to eradicate the problems of trauma under the guise of exchanging them for the pleasure of “meaning,” Langer’s disfiguration acknowledges the persistence of trauma in lived experience by producing multiplied, fragmentary narratives that hope to more accurately evoke the phenomenology of trauma.114

Reconstructing Redemption?

And yet the why of redemptive representation remains, an ethical question worked into the slippery psychological and theoretical efforts that seeks to respond pragmatically to suffering. While Langer’s “disfiguration” provides a solution to one problem—how to engage ethically with others’ and historical traumas as they are represented in art and elsewhere—it does not respond to the question of how to

effectively heal trauma when its healing cannot resolve in a cure. Building from cultural trauma theory, a growing number of psychologists and social theorists have employed trauma studies vocabulary to more effectively address the legacies of American slavery and anti-black racism and push for tangible change. Although these categories are always subject to slippage, cultural trauma functions through a different set of mechanisms than individual, psychological trauma and produces different results. Rather than simply analogizing the internal defenses of individual survivors in a lazy theoretical appropriation, Neil Smelser attributes cultural trauma to “social agents and controlling groups” who translate “historical memory” (real or imagined) into a communal “trauma for which the society has to be held responsible.”\footnote{Neil J. Smelser, “Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma,” in \textit{Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity}, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 39, 38.} Jeffrey Alexander explains the production of these cultural trauma “master narratives” through the identification of four elements: “the nature of the pain,” “the nature of the victim,” the “relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience,” and the “attribution of responsibility” to the identified perpetrators and the affected community.\footnote{Jeffrey C. Alexander, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma” in \textit{Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity}, 13-15.} Ron Eyerman distinguishes cultural trauma from its individual counterpart by describing a “cultural process” in which the “trauma is mediated through various forms of presentation and linked to the reformation of collective identity.”\footnote{Ron Eyerman, \textit{Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity} (New York; Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1.} Eyerman goes on to apply these theories to the historical development of African American identity in the aftermath of slavery as a way of both acknowledging and not undercutting or simply lamenting the impact of trauma on cultural formation.

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\item \footnote{Jeffrey C. Alexander, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma” in \textit{Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity}, 13-15.}
\item \footnote{Ron Eyerman, \textit{Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity} (New York; Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1.}
\end{enumerate}
\end{flushleft}
While Eyerman focuses on the production of African American identity from within the population, others emphasize racism’s legacies in the oppressive system itself, particularly in the legal and cultural practices persisting even in the post-civil rights United States. Racism’s traumatic form manifests in a mix of explicit and elusive ways, but it does not so much fall into the essentially unrepresentable as it does into the systematically unrepresented and unarchived—what Arundhati Roy calls not the “voiceless” but the “deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.” In order to provide concrete evidence for these systemically suppressed realities, many have turned to psychology as a means of legitimizing the ignored effects of racism through quantitative scientific methods. Racial trauma or race-based trauma entered the official psychological lexicon in a number of studies over the past decade and a half. One of the primary psychologists in this subfield, Robert Carter wrote in 2006,

Race-based traumatic stress injury can be a consequence of emotional pain that a person may feel after encounters with racism, which can be understood in terms of specific types of acts (as distinct types: racial harassment or hostility, racial discrimination or avoidance and/or discriminatory harassment, aversive hostility). How encounters with racism are experienced depends on many factors associated with an individual’s background, health, and cognitive processing. Thus, the person who interprets and appraises his racial encounter as extremely negative (emotionally painful), sudden, and uncontrollable, may exhibit signs and symptoms associated with the stress and possible trauma of racism.


The exponentially growing subfield has gained greater attention in wake of the Movement for Black Lives, with think pieces peppering the internet in sources ranging from Psychiatric Times to Teen Vogue.\(^{121}\) Their authors advocate for race-based trauma’s legitimation within formal psychology through PTSD and the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), as well as in popular psychology and other popular discourse that argue for the urgency of fighting racism’s persistent tangible—if elusive, or rather gaslit—impacts. This research shows that racism is not a fact left to history but a persistent phenomenon with tangible effects in the present, some of which can be helpfully articulated through the quantitative language of psychological trauma. The “curse … passed down through generations,” for example, takes on a different meaning when understood through epigenetics.\(^{122}\) We can see in this example and elsewhere that psychological legitimation is deeply important in its power to translate the inchoate into quantitative data that can be used for progressive change in legal, therapeutic, and social justice contexts. While the meta-narrative of teleological redemption that this chapter has sought to deconstruct remains an ontological thorn in the side of psychology’s agendas, it also keeps the teleological machine moving in order to make incremental change.

Returning to this chapter’s inciting concern with the narratological dilemmas of traumatic healing, we see quite explicitly in the case of race-based trauma that the seemingly opposed factions of psychological and post-modern trauma studies are nonetheless co-existent, alternately clashing with and co-constructing each other. The


very project of defining trauma opens up theories of its mechanics, which lead to the forms of trauma’s non-narratives and trauma studies’ narratives of ethical response. Thinking closely about trauma’s spatial, dynamic, and spectral forms denaturalizes the reductive redemption narrative of teleological healing toward a cure that flattens trauma and thus fails to respond to trauma on its own terms. We have closely examined this redemptive narrative as it reduces traumatic complexity into temporary conflict that may be resolved in the happy ending of ultimate order. This narrative structure fails to represent the mechanics of unplotted real life and the multiplying forms of trauma. Derridean deconstruction can help us unpack and break down this linear story-shape that silences trauma as it seeks to ameliorate it, revealing the political impacts of the narrative itself. As we consider the theological and American progressive perspectives, especially those that address the very real violences of American anti-black racism and work to dismantle it, we must keep in mind the immanent values of progressive thought and action that are intimately linked to teleology even as we continue to deconstruct teleology’s reductive tendencies. Having laid out and, perhaps, further entangled us in the mechanisms of trauma and the ethics of its study, we can attempt to hold all of these concerns as we turn to contemporary theological re-imaginings of traumatic redemption.
CHAPTER TWO

THEOLOGIES OF TRAUMA AND THEIR CHRONOTOPES OF REDEMPTION

Narrating Traumatic Redemption

We have seen throughout this thesis that trauma interrupts narrative by precluding its smooth sequence of events in linear time. Trauma studies scholars have suggested various means of representing the unrepresentable of trauma, which requires new articulations of the space-time in which the dynamic, spatial, and spectral characteristics of trauma manifest. While these revised ontologies offer modes of creatively representing traumatic forms and experiences, they do not necessarily resolve the narrative dilemma faced in trying to heal trauma that cannot be cured. This conflict between trauma and narrative thus doubles as scholars and psychologists experiment with which narratives of traumatic healing can respond effectively to the non-narratives of trauma.

Despite this antagonism, we find in Christianity a basic narrative constituted from the foundational trauma of Christ’s torturous death by Crucifixion and its persistent reanimation across Christian traditions. As we saw in Chapter One, trauma is typically distinguished from other crises as a violent event or events that refuse to be integrated into an existing worldview and instead completely restructure the survivor’s worldview. Both ephemeral and insufficiently documented, the “violent event” of the crucifixion cannot be “fully grasped as [it] occur[red],” thus, in order to come to terms with the crucifixion and its implications, Christians of varying kinds “return later”
through the “repetitive phenomena” of worship, theology, and other practices. Additionally, the violent crucifixion event reconfigures the Jewish-turned-Christian cosmology by linking the Edenic fall with Christ’s redemptive work and offering salvation for good Christians at the end of time. The Incarnation itself enacts a structural trauma by mingling the previously distinct categories of God and humanity, completely calling into question the divine’s position in the world. For Christians, to “most direct[ly] se[e]” the mysteries of the Christ event is to engage in the “incomprehensibility” that persists within the seeming answers traced out by doctrine. This interplay between the known narrative framework and the persistently unknowable nature of the mystery sustains the Christian story as it continually deconstructs and reconstructs its traumatic dialectics in its many retellings.

Heather Walton highlights the traumatic form of Christian narration, writing that narrative is the very “locus of [the] healing encounter between” survivors and caregivers, and calling attention to the forms in which storytelling occurs. Drawing from the claim that “redemptive power rests in the human capacity for storytelling” by giving other stories meaning through the story of the Christ event, Walton identifies trauma’s eluding form as an obstacle to redemption itself. In order to address this “crisis in human narrative” as it is verbalized and as it is enacted in the salvation process, one must

123 Caruth, Unclaimed Experience, 91-92.
124 Ibid.
125 Skeptics might point out that neither of these events necessarily occurred; however, because trauma is the after effect(s) rather than the violence itself, the event need not have actually occurred for an individual or community to experience trauma. Additionally, because traumatic memory is inherently fragmented, one cannot and thus need not identify precise facts to read an experience as traumatic. (Alexander, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma,” 8.)
127 Ibid.
consider the possibilities of narrative more broadly by including “image, symbol and metaphor” as well as “silence” as media for storytelling.\textsuperscript{128}

Shelly Rambo corroborates Walton’s titular call for “speaking in signs” by arguing that attention to narrative is necessary in thinking through “theology’s ability to speak to certain kinds of experiences” and broadening what might count as an appropriate and effective theological mode of traumatic narration.\textsuperscript{129} Rambo explains that both theopoetics\textsuperscript{130} and trauma studies continually re-examine form itself, which is “a connection” that “is instinctual to those who work in either of these areas.”\textsuperscript{131} Insofar as both fields study “experiences that defy form,” they explicitly and creatively seek “language that can account for the shattering experience.”\textsuperscript{132} This sentiment, of course, evokes the concerns of scholars examined in Chapter One: what Herman identifies in the paradox of atrocities’ double need to be suppressed and expressed, what Pollock explains in the present absences and absent presences of traumatic representation, and how Adorno and Langer respond to the ethical dilemma of representing trauma in a way that defies the pleasure of aestheticization. By “position[ing themselves] at the sites in which language breaks,” Rambo argues that theologians can open their work to creative experimentation on the edges of representation in order to “ask which forms of discourse [can] attest to that shattering” and the “multiple truths” that emerge.\textsuperscript{133}

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{130} This relatively new subfield of theopoetics can be defined in four parts: “(1) an emphasis, style, and positive concern for the intersection of theology and spirituality with the imagination, aesthetics, and the arts, especially as (2) it takes shape in ways that engender community-affirming dialogue that is (3) transformative in effect and (4) explicit about embodiment’s importance.” For further definition, see “What is Theopoetics?”, \textit{The Association for Theopoetics Research}, accessed April 15, 2017, theopoetics.net.
\textsuperscript{131} Rambo, “Theopoetics of Trauma,” 3.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 8.
This narrative complexity, however, often gets shoehorned into the predominant teleological “sin-grace story” that papers over the traumatic forms intrinsic to Christian theology. Making a similar argument, Serene Jones gives a brief gloss of the story that “most Christians know … by heart”:

“God creates the world. The world gets into trouble and can’t get out of it. God, out of love, dramatically intervenes so as to save the world—Jesus comes, dies, is raised—and as a result, something new and good emerges. Humanity is saved. Sin is met by grace, and grace conquers it. In this regard, it is fundamentally a tale of triumphant vanquishing, in which, at the end of the day, grace abounds.”

Jones describes how Christians internalize this story through many modes, explicitly and subconsciously, and how it seeps into the logic of the Christian perspective that habitually “expect[s] the world to be broken and … grace to come.” The presence of this dynamic is “what makes Christians such inveterate hopers,” but it proves a problem in the face of traumatic suffering that may never neatly conclude. The story’s “almost instinctual optimism” is not only difficult to sustain, but it dangerously “trains one to assume that if one works hard enough at healing, one will obtain what one asks for.” While hope has its uses in sustaining people’s faith and motivating positive change, hope’s intrinsic teleology clashes with trauma’s non-teleological narrative form. Trauma denaturalizes this essentialized redemption logic and raises questions about the structure of the narrative itself.

Walton, Rambo, and Jones are joined by a number of contemporary theologians who experiment with narratives of Christian redemption that can account for traumatic experience, producing a body of work that I will call “theologies of trauma.”

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135 Ibid., 153.
136 For a list of sources that comprise this subfield, see Appendix, 120.
Suffering has posed perennial questions for Christian theology, from the death of its founder to the general persistence of sin and suffering of the broader human condition, and again and again in sociohistorical crises that call for theological response as they arise (e.g., the transatlantic slave trade, the ongoing white violence against black Americans, the Holocaust, state-sponsored violence in Latin America). Using the theoretical tools of trauma studies, the theologies of trauma that foreground this chapter seek to provide an intellectual space in which Christian thought can explicitly relate to the many forms of traumatic experience that individuals, communities, and national cultures undergo.

We have seen in Chapter One that various theoretical responses to trauma engage its narrative mechanics, and that their proposals of traumatic healing take on the story-shapes of redemption that echo Christian cosmology. Redemption as narrative entails a sequence of events, grounding the transformation in a linear arc that breeds a limited set of interpretations. Because trauma interrupts sequential narrative, we can no longer see trauma as dis-order that can resolve itself in a cure (e.g., van der Kolk and McFarlane in Chapter One) or as sin that can be simply redeemed by grace (as described and critiqued by Jones). Given that Christian narratives nonetheless emerge through trauma, we can consider the ways in which narrative and trauma co-constitute each other in revised terms.

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This chapter will look at three clusters of theological works that respond to trauma by proposing redemption narratives through three alternate approaches to narrative time. We will first look at works by Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger and others that utilize the medicalized teleology of psychology to orient traumatic healing toward the future. Next, we will compare the ways that Dirk Lange and Matthew Johnson’s attention to historical trauma configures contemporary Christian liturgies in relation to the past. Finally, we will examine several postmodern-inflected theologians in conversation (Shelly Rambo, Storm Swain, Flora Keshggeian, and Monica Coleman) who offer modes of redemption that are always in process amidst the thickened, dynamic present of traumatic aftermath.

As we consider narrative time, we will return again to Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope that was elucidated in the Introduction. A chronotope entails a time-space in which a narrative happens, and its physical laws delineate what types of characters, themes, and plots are able to operate within the chronotope. Likewise, the components of any narrative gesture toward their corresponding chronotope(s)—either of a genre or of the particular story-world—whose rules we can identify through careful analysis. When the sin-grace story stops working in cases of trauma, our theologians not only rethink these redemption narratives but implicitly theorize new chronotopes in which traumatic redemption might occur.

Telos

Our first cluster of trauma-informed theologies maps the teleologies of psychological healing and Christian redemption onto each other to counter the problem
of traumatic suffering with the hope of its future solution. This subset includes pastoral care resources that simplify the vocabulary of PTSD to provide accessible guides for pastors and caregivers to respond to traumatized survivors in their communities. In her book on *Bearing the Unbearable*, Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger uses psychology to ground the work of pastoral care in medical language that can delineate pragmatic, incremental change. Likewise, by configuring these psychological methods within the Christian cosmological frame, Hunsinger directs psychotherapy toward an ultimately “reconcil[ed]” telos that sustains hope for effectively healing trauma in the future.

Hunsinger opens her book by verbally drawing a diagram of “nested concentric circles” that delineates five levels of trauma. These circles “[begin]” in their center with the basic category of human “suffering involved in facing our own mortality and personal capacity for evil;” the next circles in order denote “interpersonal traumas,” trauma based in “betrayal of trust” (e.g., sexual abuse), “intergenerational trauma,” the trauma of “structural violence” (e.g., systemic racism), and “the terror of natural … disasters” and “moral catastrophes” (e.g., war and genocide). While she notes that these circles “affect every level of our lives,” Hunsinger narrates them in a definitively linear progressive order: she starts in the center and moves outward to show how the description “reach[es] progressively outward to traumas that have greater scope.”

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138 In addition to Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, I have primarily considered works by Roger P. Abbott, Lynn Bridgers, C. Kevin Gillespie, Cynthia Hess, and David Schnasa Jacobsen. See Appendix, 120.
140 In addition to this dis-ordering trend, trauma is sometimes explicitly coded as “destruction” and “evil,” implicitly in opposition to Christian good that will eventually overcome through perseverance. (C. Kevin Gillespie, “Terror, Trauma and Transcendence: Pastoral Ministry after 9/11,” *The New Theology Review* [2004]: 16, 17; Roger P. Abbott, “Trauma, Compassion, and Community: Reconciling Opposites in the Interests of Post-Traumatic Growth,” *Practical Theology* 5, no. 1 [2012]: 34, 39, 42.)
141 Ibid., xi.
142 Ibid.
143 Ibid.
Hunsinger acknowledges the diversity of traumatic experiences in the act of ordering them, emphasizing both the universalized individual suffering at the image's core and the broader “all” that we see by progressing through the intermediate regions of historically specific traumas.

Hunsinger repeatedly invokes this progressive motion that expands through a circular field, both in her book’s stated purpose and in its underlying Christian framework. As a work of pastoral theology designed to help caregivers support traumatized lay people, Hunsinger’s book “aim[s] … to present conceptual frameworks and practical strategies for healing … from a center in the gospel.”144 While Hunsinger acknowledges the narrative complexity of trauma itself and of a methodological approach that must “[weave] together various theoretical and practical threads with the faith, practice, and theology of the church,” the “healing” narrative she ultimately suggests is one that promises to “reconcil[e]” fragmentary present conflicts by beginning in a clear “center” in order to move into a resolved and whole future.145 In keeping with the basic premise of talk therapy, healing from trauma can happen for Hunsinger through the practice of narration itself. Even when trauma evades traditional narration in “fragmented” and “inchoate” stories, the very process of having “their stories [heard]” can connect the isolated survivor to their social world for a better future.146 Here we see the same story-shape of circular progression in Hunsinger’s three-part healing narrative that lays out the story fragments in a meshwork, positions the individual survivor in a definition spot in that meshwork, and promises to restore the individual’s connection to

144 Ibid., xii.
145 Ibid.
146 Ibid., xiii.
the social and physical world by means of progressive healing oriented toward the future telos of wholeness.

Hunsinger positions this healing movement from individual to all within a universalized Christian framework, legitimating the methods of post-traumatic pastoral care as part of the lineage of “Christ’s healing and reconciling work, completed once and for all in his death on the cross.” This “healing work” that began with Christ, she explains, “continues to radiate outward, reaching persons and communities, and even nations that are reeling from overwhelming pain at every level of their common life.”

By paralleling this Christian cosmological meta-narrative with the historically specific methods of trauma psychology and with personal narratives, Hunsinger suggests that they all can be read in the same progressive story terms that ensure a teleological solution. Additionally, Hunsinger’s Christian framework echoes the teleological framing power of the sin-grace story that Jones offers us: both arrange present difficulties in terms of a future in which the conflict of traumatic fragmentation will one day be reconciled in an all-encompassing and good whole. By configuring her pastoral project within the larger cosmic narrative, Hunsinger treads in the dangerous territory of analogy: in her attempt to give traumatic survival spiritual meaning, she conforms it to the rigid shape of its Christian macrocosm, producing identical layers of narrative whose narrow forms fail to capture the complexity of trauma that can never fully resolve in such a telos.

Thinking chronotopically, Hunsinger’s model of healing is grounded within a time-space that operates on two simultaneous scales: that of an individual grounded in

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147 Ibid., xii.
148 Ibid., xiii.
the present by specific details, and that of the broad strokes of cosmological time
oriented toward its divinely ordained telos of reconciliation. This doubled time
reads various events in the present as evidence of the incremental movement in the
overarching progression, echoing Richard Leeman’s definition of teleology that moves
toward “perfectability” based on the promise of unreachable “perfection” in the future.
Hunsinger’s very title, Bearing the Unbearable, exemplifies this “paradoxical” teleology as it
grounds the problem of trauma in the tension produced in binary oppositions (“bearing”
and “unbearable”) to trace out the cosmic conflict that will be resolved in the future.¹⁴⁹

Origin

Having considered the future-oriented redemption narrative in Hunsinger’s
medicalized Christian teleology, we will now look at two thinkers who explain present
dynamics of trauma in relation to the past. Rather than focusing on individual trauma
through the vocabulary of psychotherapy as we saw in Hunsinger, both Dirk Lange and
Matthew Johnson focus on cultural trauma—attuned to the collective and to
metaphor—to explicate its impacts at the level of historical time. Unlike the case-by-case
work of pastoral care that brings individuals into the future, the liturgies that Lange and
Johnson analyze construct webbed narrative forms that point back to its origin in the
past. Liturgical practices retell the Christian story through the mixed media of worship
services, such as scripture, testimony, song, and material culture (e.g., incense burning,
snake-handling, the affective impact of the architecture). For example, the weekly
Sunday Eucharist service in many Christian denominations performs specific rituals that

¹⁴⁹ See Introduction, 14.
repeatedly, creatively, and inconclusively reenact their unknowable traumatic origin in the insufficiently archived life and death of Jesus Christ. 150 Unlike Hunsinger’s chronotope that subsumes present details within the progressive arc offered by the sin-grace story, Lange and Johnson’s chronotope of liturgy forms a meshwork of narrative fragments that open out from and thus point back to the historical rupture of the Christ event. This liturgical chronotope embeds this past origin in the present-turning-future even as that origin is always inaccessible and incompletely knowable.

A Lutheran theologian, Lange employs trauma theory to consider the narrative structure of revolution events that routinely agitate hierarchical complacency, in keeping with his Lutheran foundation in Protestant Reformation’s celebrated disruption of the Catholic Church’s systematized corruption, which he links to political revolutions from the eighteenth century through the present. Lange defines “an event” as “always in some ways a rupture” to explains how certain events—whether traumatically disruptive or not when they occurred—later subsume the role of traumatic origin that restructures the worldview of revised histories. 151 This delayed logic is what produces beginnings that were never really The Beginning, producing cultural narratives that emanate from that starting point.

For Lange, the central question that trauma asks is “Why did I survive?” as the survivor tries to make sense out of the non-sense of such a close encounter with death. 152 Lange translates this question into its theological counterpart, “Why did I survive the death of God?”—a question that the disciples ask after Jesus’ death that undergirds the

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150 Heather Walton writes that the “symbols and rituals of [the Christian] tradition” combined with the “language of silence and … new symbols” provide media for “mediating [traumatic] experience” (Walton, “Speaking in Signs,” 5).
151 Dirk Lange, Trauma Recalled: Liturgy, Disruption, and Theology (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 1.
152 Ibid., xi.
liturgies that Christians continually repeat and reimagine in worship.\textsuperscript{153} Insofar as liturgy asks “that question” in the very fact of its memorializing performance, it maintains its own “disruption” as it “fail[s]” to adequately “respon[d].”\textsuperscript{154} This irresolvable rupture is what drives the practice of Christianity, “producing life” as it constantly tries to reconcile (with) this trauma. For Lange, the primary dilemma of trauma theory is not in the challenge of navigating one’s traumatized lifeworld—as we have considered throughout—but in the existential question of “Why are we (still) here?” that seeks to position our experiences in the world within a pre-ordained narrative of theological purpose. Even as this existential question fails to be answered, it roots the present in a historical origin, offering the possibility of answer in a narrative oriented toward the past.

Lange engages the narrative forms of trauma theory insofar as he disconnects the theory from its lived counterparts. The resultant narrative utilizes a trauma-like rhythmic cycle of rupture and resolution to propel its progressive teleology. Lange values trauma-like disruption as the driving force of Reformation theology, which seeks to agitate cultural complacency to challenge oppression and improve the world. By likening traumatic and revolutionary rupture for his stabilized mode of destabilizing, Lange’s analogy reduces the specificity of the erratic and multiple dynamics that typically define trauma.

Matthew Johnson also engages the metaphors of historical rupture in an article that identifies African American Christianities’ ontological inheritances from the traumatic events of the Middle Passage. Johnson articulates the ongoing impact of this historical forced migration of the transatlantic slave trade by way of the world-making

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{153} Ibid.
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metaphors of cosmology, whose “violent explosions, collisions and catastrophes” shape the universe and the “emergence of life” within it.\textsuperscript{155} The incomprehensible violence of the Middle Passage in its world-breaking and world-making function is what gives it its haunting form: just as the Middle Passage continually shapes the racist time-space of the American present, its overwhelming scale eludes consistent representation in the “ongoing debate” of slavery’s effects on African Americans, the wider American (and global) population, and American history.\textsuperscript{156}

Johnson lays out broad strokes of the African American Christian chronotope by giving a close reading of the symbolic legacies of the Middle Passage to show how traumatic time emerges in and shapes this branch of Christian ontology. Whereas other American immigrant stories emphasize the successful transition from origin place to desired “destination,”\textsuperscript{157} the forced migration of slaves ripped their “journey” out of its mapped geography, leaving African Americans still “very much on the water; marginalized and suspended between worlds.”\textsuperscript{158} Johnson imagines for us how a slave traveling through the Middle Passage without other navigational tools becomes reliant on the sky as the only stable point in a ruptured world through which they are nonetheless moving in an unknown direction. Johnson explains that in adopting Christianity, “African Americans appropriated the symbol of heaven, ‘a place’ outside of the vagaries of temporality, as the only stable reference point to mark their path on the waters” in the continued effort to make sense of this traumatic encounter with the void

\textsuperscript{155} Matthew V. Johnson Sr., “The Middle Passage, Trauma and the Tragic Re-Imagination of African American Theology,” \textit{Pastoral Psychology} 53, no. 6 (2005): 541.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 542.
\textsuperscript{157} Note how this kind of American immigrant narrative fits within the chosen people trope adopted from Christianity by American civil religion to justify the willful seizure of other people’s land. (Introduction, 15.)
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 549, 541.
in which all orientation is stripped from the human subject in this physical and philosophical trauma. This tragic chronotope suspends its adherents in a liminal space-time defined by its inaccessible endpoints of “Africa” and “America” and of past origin and future telos. Its tragedy arises in the conflict of its traumatized teleology: marooned in the middle, these subjects (in Johnson’s reading) remain aware of the end goals just as they fail to identify any means of reaching them. In some ways, the “profound melancholia” of this “rootless-ness” that Johnson describes emerges precisely through the negation of roots that ought to be there, in the brokenness of the teleology that would have otherwise promised contentment through stability.

The Middle Passage provides a conceptually useful origin of multiple types of trauma that emerged from slavery, which certainly fits Lange’s definition of an event-rupture that simultaneously reorients and continually agitates historical narratives of nations, populations, and individuals. Unlike Lange’s abstraction for narrative stability, however, the narrativization of the Middle Passage as traumatic origin resonates with a number of imbricated lived traumas, including the immediate psychological trauma of slavery’s first victims, and the ongoing race-based trauma of their contemporary descendants in epigenetics, violences propagated by the United States legal system, and the theoretical construction of African American cultural trauma. Whereas Lange’s analogy flattens the complexities of trauma for the sake of narrative order, as we saw with our other teleologically inclined theologians of trauma, Johnson’s comparative work of metaphor opens up the narrative mechanics of the Middle Passage as a trauma.

159 Ibid., 550.
160 Ibid.
161 Ibid., 551.
162 See Chapter One, 56.
Considering their different theories of traumatic origins, these two thinkers do share an orientation toward the past that produces modes of redemption through continual reenactment of a haunting past. Just as Hunsinger’s hopeful chronotope sustains the possibility of a future telos that we may reach eventually because we cannot reach it soon, Lange and Johnson offer tragic chronotopes that tie the present to its indelible origin, in a kind of inversion of teleology that places the telos in a past that the people of the present can never fully access. In both cases, redemption in the present is promised and precluded by the futures and pasts that linger in these narrative forms, characterizing and distracting from the material dynamics of the now.

Middle

Our third cluster of theologies of trauma constructs narratives of redemption as they are viewed from within a thickened present. This present is comprised of dynamic relations of past, present, and future temporalities that can no longer be neatly divided in three. We have seen in the Introduction that the phenomenology of trauma calls attention to the space-time and its meshwork of relations in and through which the experience of trauma occurs. Thinking through Butler and Yancy, this meshwork brings us into these relations and their vulnerabilities that may be theorized from this immersed position. Likewise, Chapter One showed how considering trauma as narrative rather than disordered void reveals the dynamic, spatial, and spectral forms of its mechanisms. Even as psychologists and others try to resolve the dis-order of traumatic time, they do so by grappling with temporal mechanics of this ongoing reconciliation in the traumatized present. Conscious of their situation in the relational present, Storm Swain
and Shelly Rambo offer narratives of traumatic redemption by sketching out the chronotopes that emerge in the aftermath of trauma.

Storm Swain theorizes a mode of traumatic healing that is attuned to the rather literal chronotope of Ground Zero in *Trauma and Transformation*, a semi-ethnographic reflection on her ministry at the 9/11 Temporary Mortuary (T. Mort). Swain’s focus on the pastoral model of T. Mort directly implicates its physical site of trauma at Ground Zero and the interacting bodies of chaplains and visitors seeking care. The site itself exemplifies metaphors of trauma in its form as a physically imprinted semi-void scarred by destruction and filled with the ephemera of toxic debris and the comings and goings of its human inhabitants. Compared to explicitly individual and even communal traumas, the aftermath of 9/11 variegates survivorship across types of affected people (including the dead, survivors, first responders, clergy, and visitors) and the nation at large, which raises questions for Swain about how to “minister to the traumatized when one might be traumatized oneself.”

Considering this meshwork of survivorship combined with clergy’s role of offering interactive support, Swain’s theology speaks through the relations that constitute the cultural trauma that occupies Ground Zero.

Swain’s emphasis on relation grows out of her Trinitarian theology that emphasizes the verb functions of the divine “Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, [and] Life-giver” rather than the patriarchal noun statuses of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Whereas ontologies obsessed with the ultimate One cast anything more as tragic fragmentation, the shape of the Trinity suspends itself as both many and one, a multivalent whole that

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164 Ibid., vii.
links the ongoing network, connecting the divine and the world. In these connections Swain’s suggested mode of transformation emerges in the “[relational]” and “reflecti[ve]” work of the T. Mort “clergy ‘to hold’ the experience” of the traumatized site “‘to bear’ the suffering of those first responders and others working in recovery and their own [suffering] to find something life giving in this experience.” Reflection adds to this connecting power of relation in its “mirroring” function that requires “a conscious sustained focus in relation to a particular topic”—not to “[mimic]” but to connect through care. Swain does not try to solve the problem of trauma but faces into the void and finds connections within it. Through this attention to detail, the void stops looking so thoroughly like a terrifying nothing, an inverse of order that threatens to swallow up stable thought. By offering a theology of relational beings (the tripled divine and the many types of survivors and supporters at Ground Zero) interacting in space-time, Swain represents the diffuse traumas of 9/11 not merely as overwhelming chaos that points to the future order to which it may or may not resolve, but as they appear in the fluctuating specifics of the relationships that emerge in the material of the physically and metaphorically traumatized site. Her relational ministry speaks through the language of care that heals without the ontological need to promise a cure. Swain works actively with the chronotopic parameters of Ground Zero to offer a mode of transforming within trauma that does not seek to transform out of trauma.

Shelly Rambo picks up this language of relational transformation in her “middle discourse,” as she navigates trauma’s position between death and life and the chronotope

165 On the oppressive “logic of the One” and its theological alternatives of divine multiplicity, see Laurel Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (New York; London: Routledge, 2008).
166 Ibid., 9.
167 Ibid., 15.
that emerges. In her book on *Spirit and Trauma*, Rambo introduces her “theology of remaining” through the casual poignancy of a conversation with a New Orleans deacon who explained in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina that “the storm is gone, but the ‘after the storm’ is always here.” This sentiment gets precisely to the “remaining” that Rambo’s theology seeks to identify, explore, and evaluate on its own terms: as many have written before, the problem of trauma is that while the traumatic event may have ended, the trauma remains. This structural feature becomes a problem for time that is constructed linearly, because, as Rambo writes elsewhere, “there are events in the past that never become ‘past,’ but are continually present to us. We repress them, we work on them, we puzzle over them and interpret them,” but they never become solidified as “past.” This sentiment, so often thought through questions of history and of our own personal “experiences” that continue to “affect us in this elemental way” lays out a temporality of trauma that refuses to submit itself to a neatly linear timeline of events that surpass each other as they enter the present and fade into the past. Events across space and time affect our memories, spatializing time and evidencing the many directions of temporal motion; to speak of trauma, which adds to this field of dynamic space-time a degree of the unrepresentable, requires a form that can witness to this remaining, this after-ness of the storm.

Rambo focuses on trauma as “an encounter with death,” defined not only as life haunted by death in the aftermath of the traumatic event but as the intermingling of the two, no longer separated securely from each other as they seemed to have been before.

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169 Ibid., 1.
170 Rambo, “Theopoetics of Trauma,” 3.
171 Ibid.
(And, after all, were life and death ever thoroughly separated other than in linguistic representation?) The altered experience of “life always mixed with death” is the “always here” that the New Orleans resident describes.\textsuperscript{172} This death, as Rambo first introduces it, is not necessarily a “literal” one, “but a way of describing a radical event or events that shatters all that one knows about the world” and “what one knows to be true and safe in the world.”\textsuperscript{173} The figurative and literal, then, are not divided registers but interacting avenues of meaning-making that co-construct our worldview with our experiences: the dialectic of life and death produces powerful symbolism because we physically grapple with the parameters of our mortality every day, and vice versa. Rambo’s attention to the metaphorical but thoroughly quotidian categories of life and death brings trauma to the fore of theology in its continual return to the crucifixion and resurrection space integral to Christianity that disrupts the boundaries of death and life and restructures the world.

By probing the narrative structure of Christian teleology, Rambo opens up the narrative mechanics of redemption that can no longer be reduced in service of a future \textit{telos}. When the events of the cross are “read in a linear fashion” they seem to tell the story of “life[‘s] … victor[y] over death” that marks the resurrection that follows as the “climax of a grand redemptive event.”\textsuperscript{174} The problem for Rambo is that this dominant interpretation has the tendency to justify, distort, or erase the trauma by its very linear-redemptive structure: the threat of death comes to exist only as a tangible, temporary obstacle for ongoing life to overcome in order to complete the narrative arc. The Easter Sunday resurrection eclipses the Good Friday crucifixion, and the space in between of Holy Saturday is forgotten in the summary. And yet, the “always here” of trauma

\textsuperscript{172} Rambo, \textit{Spirit and Trauma}, 4.
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid., 6.
precludes the possibility that such a traumatic event, an intrusion of death into life, might be neatly ended to usher in pure, new life. This “thrust towards life” of the linear redemptive narrative promotes “Christian triumphalism” that fails the very “promise” it makes to address suffering’s persistence in lived experience despite its conclusion in the narrative.\(^\text{175}\) To “gloss over” this remainder misunderstands “traumatic survival” and “threatens to elide the realities of traumatic suffering;” it is this oversimplification that “makes possible suffering’s repetition.”\(^\text{176}\)

Thinking beyond the limitations of this flattened teleology in which life must overcome death, Rambo suggests that we read this encounter from, through, and in the “middle” of the narrative, now spatialized as the “figurative site in which death and life are no longer bounded” and traumatic time moves in more than one direction.\(^\text{177}\) “Looking from the middle,” she writes, “we are oriented to suffering in a different way—always in its dislocation, its distance, and its fragmentation.”\(^\text{178}\) Suffering appears differently from the middle precisely because the middle appears differently from the middle. The middle constructed merely as the step between the origin and ending gives the illusion of a necessary conflict designed to be resolved at the end and ultimately justified by its presumed ultimate resolution. The middle as middle, by contrast, keeps us within the narrative matrix with the potential to gaze, move, and interact in multiple—if traumatically limited—directions. Rambo’s middle lifts the smoke screen of the promise—of linear narrative itself as much as of its professed salvific goal—forcing us to configure the narrative in more dimensions and revealing many more points of inquiry.

\(^{175}\) Ibid., 7, 6.
\(^{176}\) Ibid., 4.
\(^{177}\) Ibid., 7.
\(^{178}\) Ibid., 8.
Rambo fleshes out her chronotope of redemption through the material figure of her aptly named “Middle Spirit.” Rambo traces the Holy Spirit’s etymological connection to “God’s breath” and explains that this figure of breath recurs throughout scripture, including in the moment of Jesus’ death on the cross when he “gives up his spirit, his breath.” When he exits the world for a second time, the resurrected Jesus leaves his disciples with the new figure of the Holy Ghost, “who will be present with the disciples in [Jesus’] absence.” Thinking through the “fragile release” of this ambiguous breath and the spirit, Rambo renders a space of intermingled life and death. Read from this traumatic middle, death and life carry over and into each other, not in a way that resolves their opposition but that fabricates the tenuous meshwork of their relationships.

The Spirit—a spectral half-material form that connects Jesus, the disciples, and the world—witnesses to the abyss of this traumatic event, imbricating the crucifixion-resurrection events in the tangled times of their dissemination via the disciples. Rambo explains that the inheritance of the death-breath “positions [the disciplines] in relationship to an event whose effects will unfold within them” constructing new connections with past and future. The “new life” offered by the crucifixion and resurrection, then, is not one of slate-wiped purity but, Rambo writes, “of a life conceived outside of the binary framework of death and life, of endings and beginnings.” This pneumatic time “cannot be read forward” as in the typical

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179 Ibid., 111.
180 Ibid., 117, 118.
181 Ibid., 101.
182 Ibid., 121.
183 Ibid.
184 Ibid.
progressive narrative, but instead takes a “helical” shape as a “time of our shared becoming, unfurling beyond our knowledge.”  

This explicit invocation of geometry here may remind us of many of this chapter’s other theologians, who offer up narrative shapes that delineate what modes of traumatic redemption may in turn be possible. Hunsinger used concentric circles to lay out traumatic complexity to stabilize the terrain and make way for the direct, expansive motion of healing that can eventually encompass all. Johnson’s groundless present lost in the open water offers a chronotope whose ambiguous geography nonetheless suspends the present point between a definitive past and future. While Johnson’s chronotope precludes organized motion, it still promises a whole, albeit an unnavigable one. The time-space of Lange’s chronotope emerges quietly as a product of his dynamic narrative, whose oscillation between rupture and resolution converts trauma to a rhythmic sin curve that propels itself along a progressive path. Rambo’s helix, while similarly wavelike as it emerges from “oscillat[ion],” entails an alternate motion of “unfold[ing]” and “unfurling” in the twisting semi-progression of “becoming” that keeps moving but not toward any particular telos.  

This becoming movement—which we will see in a few more iterations in the next section—offers one response to the problem of paradoxical teleology by experimenting with the narrative mechanics of trauma and transformation.

Connecting

In line with Swain and Rambo, a number of theologians attuned to trauma and its processes offer narratives of redemption from the middle of chronotopes that

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185 Ibid., 126.
186 Ibid., 121, 126, 120.
incorporate the dynamic, spatial, and spectral qualities of trauma and allow for narratives of healing without a cure. We have already seen how Swain works with the time-space of Ground Zero to describe a mode of transformation based in relation and connection rather than in a transactional redemption. Rambo’s middle similarly rearranges the components of teleology to offer a pneumatic space in which time moves in multiple ways and trauma can remain in the midst of redemption. Even theologians more comfortably within the Christian teleology speak through the processual language of connection in a relational social world as the key means of redemption from traumatic isolation.187 These various articulations of connecting, remembering, opening, and active remaining echo this philosophy of becoming in which the world does not simply just exist but changes all the time—not simply being but becoming.188 As these theologies attend to transformation in its material processes of connecting, they work within the fluctuating parameters of traumatic chronotopes to theorize compatible, even if provisional, forms of redemption.

Working from the middle of collective memory, Flora Keshggegian looks to the redemptive potential of remembering as a way of “re-membering” Christian communities fraught by cultural trauma, such as her own Armenian American diaspora.189 “The multiple practices of remembering” engage with history and its


188 For further reading on theologies of becoming, see Keller, Face of the Deep, and Connolly, A World of Becoming.

temporal fluctuations through the media of remembering and forgetting. Memory is “not the solution” to trauma for Keshggeian insofar as it would reorder fragmented information in stably linear time; instead, memory offers “a resource for salvation [that] honors those who have suffered and maintains the future as open.” The machine of collective memory organizes the past, present, and future as they intermingle in the multidimensional form of spatial, dynamic, and spectral trauma that we saw in Chapter One. This multidimensionality is the “open[ing]” work of memory that Keshggeian describes: traumatic memory engaged this way can expand the collapsed reality of traumatic nihilism—or perhaps more aptly, it can articulate the unpredictable but open systems of memory that emerge in traumatic aftermath, offering opportunities in this warped chronotope of interacting time-spaces.

This kind of opening through connection that is unconcerned by the ultimate solution of an ending sounds quite a lot like process theology. Monica Coleman paraphrases this premise inherited from philosopher Alfred North Whitehead as an intrinsically temporal claim: “everything that happens is a product of the past, what’s presently possible, and what we do with those things.” To exist in space-time as “a quark” or “a person,” for Coleman, is to “undergo this continual process of sorting through … what you inherit from the world, what’s possible in your context, and what you do about it.” Coleman’s three-part definition suggests a model of redemption that we might provisionally define as acting ethically in time. As time adds a physical

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190 Ibid., 160-161.
191 Ibid., 136.
192 Mary-Jane Rubenstein, “Class #18, on Monica Coleman’s Making a Way out of No Way” (class lecture and discussion, RELI 220: Modern Christian Thought, Wesleyan University, Religion Department, Middletown, CT, November 4, 2014).
194 Ibid.
dimension in the matrix of space-time it simultaneously adds an ethical dimension because time entails the movement of bodies through it. This activity in time calls us to make decisions (both consciously and subconsciously, with more and less agentic control) about how we will act next based on our knowledge of what has happened and what is happening. As with Keshgegian’s memory work, this processual time brings together past, present, and future as they interact rather than flattening them in a timeline.¹⁹⁵

Coleman adopts process thought in an effort to merge it with womanism and Christian theology in her project of Making a Way Out of No Way. This titular call derives from the core redemptive work of womanist theology that grapples with the paradoxes of suffering that underlie Christian theology, from the fundamental crucifixion of its God to twentieth century liberation theologies like James Cone’s.¹⁹⁶ This narrative created out of nothing—or out of something messy—likewise echoes the problem that we have seen throughout trauma studies: How do we identify a cure when there is no cure for trauma? Or rather, how might we navigate possibilities of healing that reveal rather than cover over the continually opened wound?¹⁹⁷ Coleman opens up the mechanics of this paradox by grounding her analysis in her work with black women and in the forms of time their experiences inhabit. As Coleman describes it for this project, this chronotope that many black women inhabit is haunted by the traumas of lived violence and of the often tripled social violences of gender, race, and class oppression.

¹⁹⁶ See Introduction, 18.
¹⁹⁷ See Shelly Rambo, Resurrecting Wounds: Living in the Afterlife of Trauma (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, forthcoming).
that have no clear end, no obvious narrative arc that we can see from the start.\textsuperscript{198} The goal in this hazy place in space-time is to keep moving rather than to get stuck, to “make a way out of no way” because there was no one way delineated from the beginning to the end. While Coleman never uses the word “trauma,” the work of “making a way of out no way” articulates a similar attempt to narrativize traumatic redemption in a way that might represent the unrepresentable and that might heal what can never be cured.

Monica Coleman’s way made out of no way reveals how trauma and narrative co-construct each other, but in ways that require us to reimagine the terms of both. Insofar as trauma interrupts narrative, that interruption constitutes the new narrative forms that emerge. Likewise, trauma as a category is interrupted when we think it through the lens of narrative: trauma troubles categories of event, sequence, and time; but also, attunement to the elements of narrative denaturalizes the assumptions we hold about trauma as a simplistic chaotic void that produces an origin and offers a telos of a cure or simple lack thereof. This attitude reverberates throughout the theologians of trauma that we explored, but it does so most loudly in Coleman’s reading because her articulation of unnamed forms of trauma exemplifies narrative’s disruption of trauma in order to speak more precisely about those phenomena that “trauma” tries to represent.

We began this chapter with the problem of trauma’s interrupting narrative, to the extent that narrative entails a stable sequence of events, yet we also considered how the Christian narrative emerges from and through the forms of trauma. The linearity of narrative is not so linear upon closer look: insofar as teleologies assert beginnings and ends, they are inevitably always read from their middles, moving toward ends they can

\textsuperscript{198} Coleman describes in detail a scene of domestic abuse in the introduction, highlighting its physical and psychological violences and the existential questions that it raises: “What did I do to deserve this? Why is God letting this happen to me? What am I supposed to do now?” (\textit{Making a Way out of No Way}, 2)
never reach in light of beginnings installed to bind them neatly in the past. As Peter Brooks explains, narratives sustain themselves by drawing the reader rapaciously toward their ends, but as soon as it gets there, the narrative ceases to be. Viewed from the middle, redemptive teleologies open up into complex mechanisms with many points on inquiry.

Confronted with the clash of linear redemption and nonlinear trauma, our future-oriented theologians suggest a redemptive narrative suspended in a moving present by its distant *telos* while our past-oriented theologians engage in a present forever haunted by the spatiotemporal node of its unknowable origin. This temporal opposition is mirrored by an operational split as well, inasmuch as the medicalized teleologists focus on the individualized model of psychological trauma and one-on-one care while the historical thinkers focus on the cosmic impact of cultural events that swallows up questions of how individuals and smaller groups operate in the wave of cultural trauma. As the theologians in the middle immerse themselves in a thick, dynamic present, they likewise trace the resonances of individual, communal, and cultural traumas that operate differently but in a field of inter-resonance at the level of narrative and its redemption question. While the theologians, at least collectively, get somewhat tripped up by the category of “trauma” that can elude the specifics of its referents in the very act of representing it with a name, Coleman responds to the trauma problem precisely by attending to its forms, components, intellectual legacies, and present situations rather than through the void-category of “trauma” itself. We will see this next in *Between the World and Me*, as Ta-Nehisi Coates works through the imbricated traumas of anti-black 

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racism by other names in his claims, his context, and the chronotopic structure of his narrative discourse.
CHAPTER THREE

THE AMERICAN DREAM AND TA-NEHISI COATES’ MULTIPLEX REDEMPTION

The Politics of Form

Monica Coleman’s “way” for us to think about trauma carries into our reading of Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me* and its multifaceted examination of racial trauma in the United States. Throughout the memoir, Coates implicitly grapples with trauma’s fundamental unrepresentability—or, perhaps, its indirect representability—as he tries to tell a cohesive story of his experience as a contemporary black American under the continual threats of systemic inequity, physical violence, and the stresses that develop within that context. As we saw most acutely in Chapter One, trauma studies’ continual concern with the unrepresentable is partially spurred by the way that the label of “trauma” itself can obscure its diverse referents in the very act of trying to pin them down. Both Coleman and Coates offer ways of thinking about trauma not by name but instead through narrative forms that emerge in the confluence of multiple sociohistorical contexts. Even as Coates makes explicit claims about racism and the United States, his more compelling response to trauma materializes in the narrative itself, whose form is not merely a vehicle for its referents but the very site of its politics.

We can further parse the difficulties of traumatic representation in literature with the help of a foundational framework in narrative theory that divides narrative structure into the complementary parts of “story” and “discourse.”\(^{200}\) One might provisionally

\(^{200}\) The story/discourse model was born out of the Russian formalist terms *sjuzhet* and *fabula* originally popularized by Vladimir Propp and Viktor Shlovsky, though it goes back to Aristotle’s division of narrative into *logos* (story) and *mythos* (discourse). (Patrick O’Neill, *Fictions of Discourse: Reading Narrative Theory* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996], 20-21.)
define these two as the tale (what happened) and its telling. This logic likewise aligns with other dialectical pairs that we keep confronting: those of factual events and historical narrative, of referent and representation, and of reality and the Dream. This bisection relies in part on the naturalized assumption that the chronological form of the story, based on real or fictional events, is interpreted and rearranged through the secondary discourse for aesthetic effect. The reader is thus tasked with the responsibility of reconstructing the represented story from information gleaned from the discourse.

Because narrative differs from other art forms as a represented sequence of events, its constituting factor of time proves to be a major site of potential conflict in debates over accurate representation. Considering that trauma disrupts our predominant notions of time as linear and stable, literary representations of trauma must likewise “disfigure” our assumptions of supposedly regular time, which directly raises questions about the relationship between discourse and story. Lived trauma raises the stakes of representation as individuals and wider communities take on the responsibility (consciously or not) to produce discourses that appropriately reflect the non-stories of trauma. As a literary work based in non-fiction, Between the World and Me exemplifies the pressures of both normative literary and social representation when they are disrupted by trauma.

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201 Matthew Garrett, “Introduction: Narrative Theory and Formal Analysis” (class lecture and discussion, ENGL 303: Narrative Theory, Wesleyan University, English Department, Middletown, CT, September 5, 2016).
203 In a seminal book on Narrative Discourse, Gérard Genette proposes a set of narrative-time vocabulary that falls into the five primary categories of order, duration, frequency, mood, and voice. (Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980].)
204 Speaking again through Lawrence Langer’s language. (Chapter One, 54.)
We can see the politics that arise in *Between the World and Me*’s narrative form quite explicitly through the language of story and discourse. *Between the World and Me*’s discourse takes the form of a letter from its author-narrator to his teenaged son, Samori, about Coates’ experience of growing up as a black man in the contemporary United States. The letter is divided into three sections but otherwise flows together as one speech act from father to son. This mostly continuous discourse weaves in and out of myriad stories drawn from the imbricated archives of Coates’ memory, the tangential experiences of friends and acquaintances, the news, and the myth-histories of America. The various threads of story arrange themselves in co-existing temporalities, which we see in their content and grammar. These threads fall into several categories: particular events that occurred once in the past; past continuous descriptions of people and places characterized by patterned events, behaviors, and qualities of being in time and space; referential catalogues of names, places, histories, and concepts that point to trans-temporal entities manifesting presently in Coates’ lifeworld and narrative; and almost atemporal musings, myths, and explanations of persistent mechanisms (e.g., the Dream, systemic racism, and their disparate worlds). The multi-temporality of interwoven stories in *Between the World and Me* constructs American history as a precarious meshwork in which Coates is positioned—both politically and in the very narrative structure of the book—and with which he is constantly in irreconcilable dialogue.

Like Coleman, Coates presents us with a traumatized world without using the explicit vocabulary of trauma studies. Instead, Coates maps this landscape by laying out its ontological inconsistencies in a web of thoughts and memories represented in his discourse. Coates politicizes the world(s) that he describes in the very act of its discursive construction. As Coates identifies the failing teleology of the Dream and its
repercussions of traumatic suffering, his resulting exploration of how to “struggle” in this “chaos” can be read as a search for an effective redemption narrative, even as it goes by other names.\textsuperscript{205}

We have seen in Chapter Two that redemption raises questions not only about plot (what happens in a story) but also about chronotope (what kinds of stories are possible in different contexts). The way that one imagines the world to operate enables certain kinds of stories and precludes others; and yet, material parameters sometimes interrupt the ideas of the world that we imagine. Confronted with trauma, the reductive teleology of Christian triumphalism fails to redeem traumatized people and communities. Likewise, Coates recounts his experiences pervaded by racism to confront the narrative failure of the American Dream, which promises a utopian future that, according to Coates, can never be accessed by black Americans (if by anyone at all). Coates’ discursive attempt to “make a way out of” the “no way” of his racially traumatized world offers something like an alternative redemption that we can trace through the tools provided by narrative theory.\textsuperscript{206}

This chapter will examine the narrative structure of \textit{Between the World and Me} as a representation of trauma that challenges the story-shape of teleology. We will first consider the theopolitical symbolism in \textit{Between the World and Me} that disrupts the ideological opposition of Christianity and secular politics through potent metaphors. We will then contextualize the epistemological concerns of the book in the story/discourse dilemma of American history that foregrounds both the anti-racist thinkers of our Introduction and, as we will see, the contemporary Movement for Black Lives. With

\textsuperscript{205} Ta-Nehisi Coates, \textit{Between the World and Me} (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 69, 71. Subsequent references to this text will be cited internally.

\textsuperscript{206} Coleman, \textit{Making a Way Out of No Way}. 
these framing thoughts in place, we will delve into the chronotopes that Coates
delineates (the Dream, the streets, the schools, the Mecca, and the letter itself) as he tries
to make sense of the traumatic gap “between the world and [himself]” (Coates). The
irreducibility of these co-existing chronotopes will lead us into a science fiction reading
of Between the World and Me that can respond to the representational paradoxes intrinsic to
its discourse. Considering story-time in a new way will reveal how Coates’ mode of
“Struggle” reimagines redemption as a spatiotemporal process rather than merely
collapsing it into the nihilism with which he is typically charged (68).

Theopolitical Resonances

This thesis’ framing triangulation of Christianity, trauma, and the American
Dream announces itself immediately in Between the World and Me through metaphors that
denaturalize the slippery conflation of American Christian and American progressive
teologies. The text alerts the reader to this tension immediately in the first chapter’s
epigraph excerpted from a poem by Sonia Sanchez. “Do not to speak to me of
martyrdom,” the poem’s speaker proclaims, “of men who die to be remembered / on
some parish day” (4). Originally written as a response to the assassination of Malcolm X
in 1965, these lines when read through Coates’ thematics expand to encompass the
multitude of violent deaths of African Americans—male and otherwise—at the hands of
police officers, lynchers, slavers, and others that haunts the memoir. 207 Martyrdom refers

to the death or suffering of a person (martyr) that helps redeem the wider world, following in the narrative footsteps of Jesus Christ. By invoking the popular Christian concept, the poem challenges the logic that would justify these deaths as part of the larger narrative thrust toward America’s sociopolitical salvation, which covers over the trauma it claims to resolve. Sanchez’s use of the martyrdom trope denaturalizes the analogy that grafts the meaning of martyrdom onto these deaths; these murder stories no longer fit within the martyr chronotope, and they instead call for a chronotope that can account for American racism and an effective anti-racist response instead.

The epigraph’s warning flows directly into the memoir’s opening, in which Coates critiques the structurally embedded “heresies” of the Dream. As implicitly white “Americans deify democracy,” they tend to conjure up a God who “forgiv[es] … America’s heresies” of “torture, theft, [and] enslavement” rather than offering true moral guidance, which Coates implies would be the correct responsibility of a God. This theological misidentification of violence as “democracy” (doubled by that of “democracy” as “God”) sounds quite like idolatry, which denotes the practice of worshipping false gods or idols. Explicitly prohibited in the Bible, idolatry plays an integral role in the Israelites’ repetitive assertions that their God is superior to neighboring communities’ gods, which they routinely invoke in religiously justified inter-ethnic conflicts with alleged idol worshippers. The accusatory category of idolatry continues to appear at rich intersections of theology and racism, such as when

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208 The first two of the Ten Commandments forbid the Israelites from worshipping other gods or images made of the divine, i.e., idols. (Exodus 20:3-5; see also Exodus 20:23-26 on idols and altars.) Shortly after Moses delivers God’s commandments, the impatient Israelites build a golden calf idol to worship instead, which angers God so much that he inflicts them with a plague as punishment (Exodus 32). While the covenants between God and his chosen people are legally binding, the Israelites are willing to break legal decorum when interacting with other non-chosen groups, e.g., the story of Dinah and the deceitful murder of the Shechemites. (Genesis 34.) (New Revised Standard Version.)
Europeans and Euro-Americans employed idolatry as a justification to colonize unfamiliar people whose non-Christian cultures had been deemed inferior to the white Christian norm. Coates turns this delegitimizing power of idolatry back on Christian and post-Christian American whites to reveal how cultural violence works from its foundation in a hypocritical theology. Even as Coates satirizes Christian logic to invalidate it, his choice to do so illustrates how intimately linked these cultural narratives remain.

Examining “Black Futures and Black Fathers” in Between the World and Me, Vincent Lloyd tunes into these narrative resonances through political philosopher Carl Schmitt’s concept of the “theopolitical,” which Lloyd paraphrases as the “complex theological debates in the background of political ideas about sovereignty.” Lloyd identifies this dynamic in what he terms the “theopaternal” dimension of the father-son relationship in Coates’ two books to date, which Lloyd worries is covered over by the seeming secularism of the material. This blind spot, according to Lloyd, is produced by Western secularism’s broader interpretive habit of constantly disavowing its theopolitics, allowing people to make “simplistic political claims” that “cannot be freely contested” because the required grounds for debate are “always disclaimed.” As we have seen with the violent reductionism of some American and Christian teleologies,

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209 David Chidester writes about how this dynamic played out in European colonization of Southern Africa, and specifically how Europeans dehumanized Africans based on their alleged lack of proper religion in order to justify colonial violence. (Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa [Charlottesville; London: University Press of Virginia, 1996].)

210 Note that we have seen this before in the way that European Americans have used the language of chosenness to justify slavery and the seizure of indigenous people’s land as necessary means to the end of America’s God-ordained destiny. (Introduction, 15.)


212 Coates’ first memoir is called The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons, and an Unlikely Road to Manhood (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2008).

213 Lloyd, “Black Futures,” 1, 2 (my pagination).

214 Ibid., 2 (my pagination).
Lloyd not only takes issue with interpretive inaccuracy but also with the stripping of tools for interrogation in the first place.

Lloyd claims that Coates performs a similar theological disavowal in his ardent atheism, despite the theological inheritances that populate Coates’ books. Lloyd spells out this irony, arguing that Coates’ “repeated insistence on his atheism suggests just how strong a hold the traditional model of [Christian] religiosity has for him.” Lloyd’s analysis suggests an underlying chronology of a primary and pervasive Christianity that undergirds United States politics, and he critiques Coates for denying this influence on his intellectual foundation. Irony may not be quite the right reading of this, though, because we have already seen in the examples of martyrdom and idolatry that Coates consciously galvanizes Between the World and Me with a jolt of theopolitics from its very start. Whereas Lloyd’s reading works by reviving a forgotten theological lens to reveal a Christianity latent in Coates, my thesis seeks not to order these layers of intellectual history but to feel around for the inter-resonances of Christianity, trauma, and the Dream. Coates’s discourse spins a web of language and themes that destabilizes the neat separation of our triangulated categories as both a memoir and an implicit testimony to the narrative fragmentation of trauma. By denaturalizing the lazy conflation of analogy through intellectually fecund metaphors, Coates brings us to consider theopolitics in the semantic form itself.

\[215\] Ibid., 1 (my pagination).
The Problem of History

Adding to the representational confusion of conflated theopolitics, the failure to represent the stories of history with an accurate discourse catalyzes *Between the World and Me* from its position within a larger network of American social justice movements that aim to reconcile the gap between the Dream and lived realities. We have seen this problem of how we retell history throughout this thesis in the consistent way that the story-shape of teleological redemption fails to match its traumatic referents. Our Introduction’s anti-racist thinkers of the Civil Rights movement, Black theology, and Afro-pessimism have highlighted this consequential disconnect between lived reality and the American Dream. This mismatch anxiety returns with vigor as Christian thinkers try to work through the paradoxes of salvation in the crucifixion, liberation theology, and our particular focus of traumatic healing. In the book’s opening anecdote, Coates recollects a television interview during which the white host asked him “why [he] felt that white America’s progress … was built on looting and violence” (5-6). This question immediately fills him with a familiar “sadness” because it evidences the massive “gap between her world and the world for which [he] had been summoned to speak”—those alleged monoliths of “White America” and “Black America”—and because the only answer to this question for him lies in “American history” itself and its representational manipulations (6).

The failure of historical representation has played a central role in the Movement for Black Lives, whose initial upsurge concurred with Coates’ rise to fame. The movement formed in 2012 under the name Black Lives Matter in response to the highly publicized and conspicuously unjust acquittal of black teenager Trayvon Martin’s murderer (a white male adult), and the movement gathered momentum in 2014
following the shooting of another black teenager, Michael Brown, by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. The shooting sparked large protests in Ferguson, accompanied by further evidence of racialized police brutality in the deployment of the Missouri National Guard with military-grade weaponry to quell the so-called riots. The events in Ferguson, along with contemporaneous murders of Eric Garner and others, received national attention through formal news media and social media alike, “shatter[ing]” for many “what remained of the notion of a ‘post-racial’ America” and bringing to light the systemic violence to black bodies on a national scale.216 Published in 2015, Between the World and Me garnered “instant classic” status through its self-designated task of sharing a father’s experience of growing up as a black American under the specter of racism with his son, echoing the widespread anxiety and alleged readiness of many white Americans to account for this no longer avoidable gap in the American archive.217

By exposing the gratuitous violence of anti-black police brutality, both the Movement for Black Lives and Between the World and Me uncover the imbricated traumas of American racism that impact African Americans and the narrative structure of American history. Rather than conflating different experiences under the label of “trauma,” the repeating example of police brutality expands into interrelated forms of trauma that we can provisionally list. The killings themselves produce immediate traumas


of death and mourning in the victims’ families, communities, and nation. These patterned events evidence the pandemic of a nationally corrupted judicial system, which in turn points to ongoing cultural traumas of slavery and anti-black racism that we have been discussing throughout. Prolonged through their archival silencing, these cultural traumas can only be read in the tangled forms of history, legislation, psychology, and metaphor. The delayed and still partial publicization of police brutality takes the form of a traumatized archive: as each event is re-animated through explicit public representation, it gestures toward the innumerable similar events lost in the history that continue to haunt us in the murmuring of their half-erasure. Coates takes up this coalescence of concerns in his explicit attention to police brutality, systemic racism, and the failures of the Dream in a discourse that represents these politics in its chronotopic forms and the gaps that they leave between these worlds and himself.

Chronotopes in Conflict

Coates’ central aim to debunk the American Dream emerges through the discourse as a chronotopic problem: the Dream can never be realized in the various time-spaces that Coates’ inhabits because its illusory telos of utopian success only covers up the racialized suffering upon which it is built. Coates explains that he “ha[s] seen that dream all [his] life”—which he elaborates through a sensory collage of “nice lawns,” “cookouts,” and the “tast[e of] strawberry shortcake” (11). At times he “ha[s] wanted to escape into” this Dream, despite the fact that “this has never been an option because the Dream rests on [the] backs” of black people and black bodies (11). Like Leeman’s definition of teleology, the Dream sustains itself through its naturalized paradox as a thing desired precisely because it is impossible: this fantasy is realizable for some (under
the guise of “all”) precisely insofar as it must violate certain others, preventing them from ever obtaining the utopian telos in waking life.\textsuperscript{218} The Dream’s utopian state exists beyond the end of time without any sort of moving time of its own. This Dream-state also lacks a sense of real space and material in Coates’ description: its mélange of suburban imagery does not come together in a connected scene that seems like someone’s real life, let alone a life that young Coates could ever access. The Dream thus remains a dream by nature of its negative chronotope: without any grounding in the progressive present of teleology, the chronotope of the Dream as described by Coates is characterized by the unbridgeable gap between the time-space of the present and the vague non-time and non-space of the telos.

Even as its teleology breaks down, this precariously positioned myth still “thrives on” its intrinsic “generalization” that fortifies the Dream by “limiting the number of possible questions” and “privileging immediate answers,” obstructing the critical thought that would inevitably reveal the mechanism of systemic violence that underlies the Dream (50). For the Dream to function, “its adherents must not just believe in it but believe that it is just,” finding moral order in it by concealing where its logic fails (98). These ontological contradictions run deep for Coates: while many Americans deny explicit anti-black racism, they continue to prop up the mythic ideology that reinforces it, relying on arguments of “good intention” and happenstance (33). Coates paraphrases this logic with a series of half-hearted sentiments: “Mistakes were made. Bodies were broken. People were enslaved. We meant well. We tried our best” (33). The power of this logic is twofold: As Coates explains, it only holds people accountable for their intentions (which, after all, can be quite easily revised after the fact) such that actions are

\textsuperscript{218} See Introduction, 14.
reconfigured to exist beyond the bounds of people’s responsibility. Even as the chronotope of the Dream structurally precludes its own teleology, it maintains its power over the Dreamers by retaining part of the temporal logic of teleology that subsumes many particular choices and actions into its ultimate telos of prosperity and erasing their ethical import.

The illogic of the Dream exposes itself through the multiple chronotopes and gaps of Coates’ experiences, which together produce a traumatic narrative form that fails to resolve in the singular time-space that the Dream professes. Coates recollects how his younger self began to question the inconsistencies between the Dream and the worlds in which he lived, producing a chronotopic crisis. Found in different regions of the “American galaxy,” these worlds manifest in distinct metaphysical forms with their own rules and possibilities. Coates delineates a number of worlds that he has inhabited throughout his life and how they fail to accommodate the Dream, including those of the streets, the schools, and the Mecca, as well as the discourse of the letter itself.

Recollecting his youth in West Baltimore, Coates describes what we will call “the chronotope of the streets” whose grammar, plots, and characters are quite different from those of the Dream. The streets, for Coates, consist not “just [of] physical blocks, nor simply the people packed into them, but [also of] the array of lethal puzzles and strange perils that seem to rise up from the asphalt” (21-22). The streets are highly dynamic, distinguished by their “constant danger,” the active games that arise from the “[thrill]” of this threat, and their many distinctive participants, including Coates and the “crews” as well as the family members implicated on the streets’ periphery (22). While Coates describes his “clash with the streets” with past tense verbs that denote its occurring in a previous era of his life, he describes the streets in the present tense, conveying the
streets’ continuation in the present of his discourse, existing in a particular chronotope that can be described in its own terms. The distinctly chronotopic terms of this description intimately link the space, its inhabitants, and its activities in a time that spatializes beyond the confines of linear past-present-future.

The chronotope of the streets is also characterized by its dynamism that is thoroughly at odds with the chronotopic stasis of the Dream. Whereas the Dream sets its idyllic lifestyle in a consistently out-of-reach future place populated by passive, anonymous white Americans—an illusory collective that is never quite real in Coates’ description, regardless of whether real people live this way—the streets produce non-teleological stories whose non-linear and recurring events have many incidental consequences rather than one predestined outcome. This chronotopic contrast is exacerbated by the vastly different bodily ramifications of their respective inhabitants: the streets, in their spatiotemporal thickness and dynamism, position bodies as precariously material with similarly material consequences; while the Dream’s abstraction of space and time in its static future place allegedly protects its bodies by minimizing the vulnerability of their would-be materiality. It is this material vulnerability onto which the young Coates latches as the metaphysical distinction between his world and the other America “beyond the firmament” where “children did not regularly fear for their bodies” (21). This dematerialization contradicts Bakhtin’s assertion that chronotopes necessarily realize space-time in vital and thus vulnerable “flesh and blood,” revealing the Dream’s chronotope as a negative chronotope: viewed from a distance and as an inverse of

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219 This illusory non-reality of the Dream follows the illusion of whiteness itself as a racial category based on its opposition to others. In a college revelation that repeats in variations throughout the book, Coates describes how the Dream relies on “the power of domination and exclusion … and without it, ‘white people’ would cease to exist for want of reasons” (42).
Coates’ reality, the chronotope of the Dream remains out of reach of characters like Coates who are constituted as characters through their exclusion.\textsuperscript{220}

Coates continually confronts the ontological conflict of these Americas throughout the discourse, especially in the two quintessential educational environments of grade school and college that locate him at points of chronotopic intersection. These intersections might be read through Bakhtin’s “chronotope of threshold” that denotes the time-space of “crisis and break in a life.”\textsuperscript{221} The threshold is “the main [place] of action” for “crisis” events because it is where “the decision that changes a life” gets made.\textsuperscript{222}

Bakhtin enumerates some example events in the notably Christian language of “the falls, resurrections, renewals, [and] epiphanies … that determine the whole life of a man.”\textsuperscript{223} The logic of the threshold matches that of the ideal Christian redemption that claims to critically and swiftly transition its human characters from the chronotope of sin to the chronotope of salvation. While a precarious position for its characters, the threshold is nonetheless distinct, and its “essentially instantaneous [time]” promises a definitive shift along the linear path of the overall narrative.\textsuperscript{224} As we have seen throughout this thesis, traumatic redemption expands and warps the time-space of the threshold, which can no longer be passed through quickly or completely in Bakhtin’s defined sense. The two educational chronotopes that we are about to examine dilate the time of the threshold as periods of Coates’ life, but they otherwise profess to follow the basic threshold logic as positions from which Coates can see the different chronotopes on either side of the threshold he must cross.

\textsuperscript{220} Bakhtin, “Forms of Time,” 250.  
\textsuperscript{221} Ibid., 248.  
\textsuperscript{222} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{223} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{224} Ibid.
The first of these two threshold chronotopes is that of “the schools,” which Coates portrays as an institutional monolith that transparently props up the Dream in spite of its narrative impossibility in the chronotope of the streets (33). Coates illustrates the discordance of these chronotopes and narratives in a memory of ritualistic viewings of the Civil Rights Movement each Black History Month, during which “teachers urged [Coates and his peers] toward the example of freedom marchers” exhibited in “films dedicated to the glories of being beaten on camera” (32). These horrific images inspired a number of unanswered questions in the young Coates, who could only “measure these freedom-lovers by what [he] knew” of people in his lifeworld and his country (32). Confused by this story/discourse clash, the young Coates cannot reconcile the ideology of nonviolence with its foundation in continued atrocity. This ontological dissonance exacerbates the vast distances between the purported world and Coates’ experiences, but ultimately supports his growing inclination to interrogate the paradox in the hopes of crossing the threshold into world governed by consistent laws.

By contrast, Coates’ world opens up to its many parts and movement among them upon his arrival at Howard University, which he dubs “the Mecca” (39). As a “crossroads of the black diaspora” and “a port in the American storm,” the Mecca provides for Coates a foundational node through which many chronotopic worlds, characters, and their trajectories run; pointing toward the expansive many that come together at this one point (40, 39). This “crossroads” image echoes that of the threshold as a point of accessible intersection for efficient transportation. Coates’ initial description in the discourse traces the legacy and impact of the Mecca through a lengthy catalogue of family members, notable alumni, places, concepts, and histories with connections to the alma mater, as well as activities and events whose memory lingers at this spatiotemporal
confluence. Whereas the schools of his youth disavow this chronotopic fragmentation in the name of the singular Dream, The Mecca celebrates its intersectional position that brings together many spatiotemporal threads in one geographical and conceptual location as it rejects the Dream and the white America for which it stands. Like the threshold, the crossroads connects multiple worlds insofar as it offers a stable time-space of crisis through which characters can move definitively from one chronotope to another; this redemptive transition does not match chronotopic parameters of trauma.

This crisis of contemporaneous chronotopes in conflict inspires Coates to reimagine the structure of his world using the Mecca’s academic resources, and he sets out to devise what we might call a Counter-Dream that is destined to fail by the very illusory one-world logic that suspends the Dream. College-aged Coates initially devoted himself to the project of constructing “a new history told through the lens of our [African American] struggle,” that would “not just be our history but the history of the world, weaponized to our noble ends” (44-45). Coates elucidates how his approach “imagin[ed] history to be a unified narrative” that would ultimately be “free of debate” and “simply verify everything [he] had always suspected” (47). As the young Coates continues to follow the threads of his investigation, he becomes incapable of reconciling the multiplicity of the “histories, sprawling literary canons, fieldwork, [and] ethnographies” he discovers (52). Instead, he realizes through “gnawing discomfort [and] chaos” that his “education … would not award [him his] own special Dream but would break all the dreams, all the comforting myths of Africa, of America, and everywhere, and would leave me only with humanity in all its terribleness” (52). Coates is able to denaturalize the chronotope of the Dream by attending to the material parts and parameters of his world(s) that do not fit within its rules. This particular revelation leads
the younger Coates to produce a new philosophy that he names “the Struggle,” whose
chronotope arises empirically from his experiences rather than reproducing the logic of
the Dream in a Counter-Dream (68).225

Coates’ ideology of Struggle is characterized by the way that it attends
unflinchingly to the particular as much as it does to the metanarrative, in keeping with
the kind of spatial, dynamic, and spectral attention required to narrate trauma identified
in Chapter One.226 In direct opposition to the Dream’s oppressive mode of generalizing,
the Struggle takes seriously every layer of its reality, motivating action without resolution.

Returning to the specifically African American Struggle’s inciting trauma, Coates writes
that “slavery is not an indefinable mass of flesh” but “a particular, specific enslaved
woman, whose mind is active as [Samori’s] own, whose range of feeling is as vast as
[Samori’s] own” (69). “‘Slavery,’” he adds, “is this same woman born in a world that
loudly proclaims its love of freedom and inscribes this love in its essential texts, a world
in which these same professors hold this woman a slave” (70). Each of the woman’s
particular qualities that Coates elucidates deepens both her individual material being and
the monumental weight of countless particular sufferings and indignities born from the
traumas of slavery that cannot be within a simple Dream narrative. By attending and
embracing this traumatic multiplicity, Coates begins to theorize a chronotope of the
Struggle that takes the material parameters of trauma into account.

225 While this general attitude crops up throughout, it is explicitly invoked as “the Struggle” when Coates
(re)tells his son that “the Struggle is in [his] name,” which memorializes the historical figure Samori Touré
and his “struggle against French colonizers for the right to his own black body” through the transference
of meaning and establishment of genealogical/lineal connection in the quintessential speech act of naming
(68).

226 Thinking through Genette’s narrative-time vocabulary, an extended analysis of the text might examine
the various particular/pattern relationships and the way in which particular events and images become
representative of “iterative” processes, often one of many violences: each particular pain for Coates lies
both in its microcosmic import and in the intensity of undoing the erasure in identifying iterative patterns
by engaging thoroughly with each particular and its pain. (Genette, Narrative Discourse, 116.)
The Struggle emerges explicitly in the discourse as a narrative that offers an alternate redemption somewhat like Coleman’s “way out of no way” and her process-informed compatriots in Chapter Two.\textsuperscript{227} Coates’ ultimate charge for Samori is to “struggle to truly remember this past in all its nuance, error, and humanity,” engaging the spatiotemporal dynamics of the “universe itself,” exhibiting “verbs over nouns, actions over states, struggle over hope” (71). The Struggle itself engages in the dynamic aporia of “between[ness],” the vehicle through which knowledge is inherited, histories are told, and both connection and disconnection occur. In addition to “break[ing] all the dreams,” the Struggle disrupts the logic of the threshold that can never fully redeem (i.e., transcend out of) the continual traumatic clash of co-existing chronotopes (71). Coates’ political and formal shift from the singular Counter-Dream to the multi-chronotopic Struggle demands a new way of reading the surrounding world as it materializes through the structure of Coates’ discourse.

Multiplex Narration

We have seen how Bakhtin’s chronotope of threshold as the critical space of redemption breaks down in a traumatized world that is formed by tangled threads of time and space. In addition to the schools and the Mecca, the epistolary discourse of Between the World and Me operates within a threshold-like logic in its titular “between[ness]” that characterizes the relationships between Coates and the world(s), the father and son, and the narrator and reader. These pairs dialectically deconstruct to reveal a dynamic space-time material in the alleged gaps, as the irreducible forms of

\textsuperscript{227} See Serene Jones, Shelly Rambo, Storm Swain, and Flora Keshgegian throughout Chapter Two.
trauma have shown us throughout. In a setting that is longer reducible to a single
threshold that stabilizes crisis in a linear transition from chronotope to chronotope,
*Between the World and Me* calls for new laws of time-space and space-time to grapple with
the elusive multi-chronotopic form of its discourse. While Bakhtin’s theory accounts for
“mutual inclus[ion]” of interacting chronotopes; the traumatic hauntings, dissonances,
and paradoxes that characterize *Between the World and Me* push further on the features of
the chronotopic meshwork the Bakhtin begins to articulate.228 We will thus turn to David
Wittenberg’s narrative theory of science fiction to open up the spatiotemporal paradoxes
of trauma by re-articulating their narrative structure.

Wittenberg’s concept of “paratext”229 implicitly builds upon Bakhtin’s intra-
chronotopic dialogue, synthesizing conflicting story-threads insofar as it weaves them
into a multi-temporal fabric or matrix rather than collapsing them into a linear
timeline.230 In his book *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative*, Wittenberg works
through many key figures in narrative theory to address the dilemma of the “time travel
paradox” in science fiction, which he defines as “a set of events or lines that will not
resolve themselves into a single chronological or causal sequence.”231 Given that a
paradox entails the logical dilemma of having multiple truths when there ought to be one
(not quite the case in every logic), the time-travel paradox presents a problem of sense-
making for the reader who “strives for reconciliation” of the story and the discourse
where it may be impossible.232 This desire for reconciliation derives from the illusory

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228 Bakhtin, 252.
229 The paratext literally denotes everything that accompanies a text that make up the full body of a literary
work, including the covers, marginalia, epigraphs, et cetera. (Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of
Interpretation* [Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997], 1-2.)
230 David Wittenberg, “Paradox and Paratext: Picturing Narrative Theory” in *Time Travel: The Popular
231 Ibid., 118.
232 Ibid., 119.
presumption that the story chronologically precedes the discourse, which Wittenberg calls “the postulate of fabular apriority.” Fabular apriority presumes that the story exists as an autonomous entity rather than as a “referential illusion” that the discourse produces by gesturing toward it. In the example of Wittenberg’s case study novel, Samuel Delany’s Empire Star (1966), certain events that are said to have occurred in the story cannot possibly hold true in a linear sequence, and yet this question of the correct “sequence of ‘facts’ that are related and retold on the level of the [discourse] … at once demands and refuses reconstitution as ‘historical’ sequence, while nonetheless resolving itself into a singular tale.” Speaking through an amalgamation of Wittenberg’s and Coates’ projects, American history produces a crisis of fabular apriority that the Dream attempts to cover over through a teleological narrative that subordinates inconsistencies to the overarching telos. Under the pressure of Coates’ analysis the notion of a stable, singular American history falls apart, producing a new kind of story-shape that must be read through different structural terms.

Considering this story crisis, Wittenberg argues that the discourse instead produces a multidimensional form that he calls the “paratext,” which requires “multiplex narration” and reading. Pieces of information surface throughout the discourse as “potential threads of a larger multiplex fabric.” As the reader begins to assemble these threads, they cannot be reduced to a linear timeline but instead unfold as a “virtual map or diagram” that visually accounts for the ontological complexity of the events while

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233 Ibid.
234 Ibid.
235 Ibid., 129.
236 Ibid., 128.
237 Ibid., 134.
maintaining some degree of temporal ambiguity.\textsuperscript{238} This “ultimately unreconstitutable [story]” thus literalizes the spatiotemporal point of view of the reader from which the story map must be constructed.\textsuperscript{239} The paratext itself is subject to the positionality of its reader as “a visual matrix or array of its points, lines, doublings, and retracings, a thing seen and held.”\textsuperscript{240} A reader attuned to the multiversal story can see more than a linear reader can by acknowledging the subjectivity of their spatially positioned perspective. Thinking in line with Bakhtin, the paratext thickens in its multi-chronotopic setting that positions the bodies of the text, characters, author, readers, et cetera, whose materiality is precisely what makes them simultaneously vital and vulnerable.\textsuperscript{241}

Having considered the paratextual form that emerges from the discourse, which echoes the chronotopic expansion that Coates’s ideology of Struggle implies, we will turn to the role of the narrator that Wittenberg sketches through \textit{Empire Star} and that we can apply to Coates’ narration. Delany’s science fiction novel is overseen by its multiplex narrator Jewel, who explains how the reader, having recognized the story’s “cyclic and self-illuminating” nature, must “order [their] perceptions multiplexually” in order “not [to] miss the lacunae” that result.\textsuperscript{242} This fuller picture of the story—or rather, its paratextual fusion with the discourse—thus includes the gaps embedded in the emergent whole that is not reductively made complete.\textsuperscript{243} In the context of this thesis, Delany’s gap language should remind us of the narrative forms of trauma that flesh out what was otherwise relegated to abstract void. The multiplex perspective in Delany’s novel is

\textsuperscript{238} Ibid. 
\textsuperscript{239} Ibid. 
\textsuperscript{240} Ibid., 135. 
\textsuperscript{241} See the gloss of Bakhtin’s bodily metaphorics in the Introduction, 9. 
\textsuperscript{242} Wittenberg, “Paradox and Paratext,” 132. 
\textsuperscript{243} Ibid.
characterized by the form of science fiction that allows for metatextual positions of both Jewel and the reader. The paradox lies in its very fiction and the reader’s desire to make sense of the story even though they know there is no real story at all. Whereas the “simplex” narrator of allegedly regular time digests “stimuli and information” at a one-to-one rate and the latter takes in “multiple viewpoints” without being able to “synthesize them into unified patterns,” the “multiplex” narrator is able to take in the myriad data and comprehend it without making reductive sense out of its complexity.\footnote{Ibid., 130.}\footnote{Ibid., 124.}

This claim also resonates with the vocabulary of trauma as it calls for a spatial, dynamic, and spectral logic than cannot be reduced to a singular, representable real.

As we return from these portrayed worlds of science fiction, we can see that the memoir genre of *Between the World and Me* addresses a related paradox with two consequential differences: firstly, the story to which the discourse gestures is explicitly *real* though not fully realizable as a singular story; and secondly, the discourse is narrated by the person who lived those experiences rather than by an omniscient narrator who controls the fiction. Whereas Delany’s novel, through Wittenberg’s analysis, illustrates the power of the “referential pathos” to wrestle an imagined reality out of a text that the reader knows is not real, *Between the World and Me* heightens the ethical stakes of its paratextual paradox that does refer to explicit realities that affect the lives of innumerable people, past and present.\footnote{Ibid., 124.} As a multiplex narrator, Coates positions himself—already multiplied as character, narrator, and author—amid the contradicting threads of his histories. The multiplicity of these threads cannot come together in a critical threshold (as in the schools and the Mecca) or in a resolving *telos* (as in the Dream and the
Counter-Dream). Speaking through Delany and Wittenberg, we can see how Coates’ ideology of Struggle demands a multiplex reading of the world as a matrix of particular viewpoints: of personal, inherited, and indirect individual experiences; of cultural and historical data; and of myths and systems.

“Ultimately,” Wittenberg argues that in the case of the time travel paradox of Delany’s novel “the desire or need to make a single picture out of the story’s history, despite illogic or incompatibility, trumps the paradox,” which Wittenberg attributes as “the power possessed by the paratext” to materialize the information presented in the discourse of the story. Thus, “the story does not end in a state of chaos or indeterminacy but rather with a fully concrete paratext” that is concrete insofar as it provides all the materials necessarily to continually “play the dialectical game of reconciling temporal order.” Such a resolution may be possible in a fictional work that, though ambiguous, presents all of its information between the covers of the book—an arguably complete data set. Though the ultimate multiversal fabric of the story diverges from a traditionally aligned story and discourse, the closed system of the fictional world can be isolated as a kind of whole—dynamic but complete.

Coates’ narrative, however, does not have the luxury of resolving its chaos, even through the dialectical game it plays with history. Composed from the nonfiction of history and its consequences, Between the World and Me plays with borders that remain permeable. Whenever the spatiotemporal logic seems to settle into clarity it is disrupted by the traumatic intrusions of death in unexpected bursts of violence and the specters of

246 Ibid., 140.
247 Ibid., 139-140.
black victims of police shootings that haunt the news and the black experience. It is precisely the irruptive proximity of death that incites the narrative project: “I am writing to you,” Coates writes to Samori, “because this was the year you saw Eric Garner choked to death for selling cigarettes; because you know now that Renisha McBride was shot for seeking help, that John Crawford was shot down for browsing in a department store;” and that several other high-profile killings and countless anonymous others continue to disrupt the developing worldview of his young American son who cannot reconcile the language and the events of the nation or its judicial system (9). In narrative theory terms, these events continually impede the alignment of the story and discourse that the Dream postulates. It is this irrevocable traumatic fragmentation of the story ideal that leads Coates to construct a paratextual alternative filled with the “lacunae” of judicial reports that contradict other accounts of the events. The gaps left by these untimely deaths rip their victims out of the temporality of their lives and haunt the multiplied time-spaces of Coates’ world.

Harkening back to our introduction in *A Wrinkle in Time*, we see that modes of science fiction may be better able to experimentally sketch out the phenomenology of trauma that operates under alternate physical properties than the ones that we typically attribute to the “real world.” Considering the theopolitical questions that foreground this thesis, the Struggle offers an alternate mode of redemption that does not resolve

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248 A large portion of the book engages with the figure of Prince Jones, a college classmate of Coates’ who was killed by a police officer and who haunts Coates’ memory and the discourse (especially 76-84, 135-147). Coates’ descriptions of Prince as past friend and present ghost-like memory disrupt the boundaries between life and death, between individuals (especially as he imagines Prince’s family and later meets Prince’s mother), and between moments in time mingled by trauma. Coates’ drive to memorialize Prince through memory, conversation with Prince’s mother, and writing in the discourse likewise returns us to questions of witness that pulsate throughout both trauma studies and theology, though not explicitly in this thesis.

ontological confusion by redefining the world in a stable time-space but that engages embodied individuals like Coates and Samori in spatiotemporally rooted processes. Like the theologies of Coleman, Rambo, Swain, and others; this processual redemption sustains itself through relation, connection, and undirected evolution in the struggle to “make … peace with” an end-less “chaos” (71).

Considering the Struggle as it emerges in Coates’ paratext offers a new way of reading the alleged hope and hopelessness in *Between the World and Me*. Vincent Lloyd and many others have criticized Coates for the seemingly simplistic nihilism of his politics that challenges hope for teleological improvement.250,251 While we do see denials of nominal hope in the text, Coates’ Struggle is not simply defeatist when we read it as a narrative form (10). Regardless of his authorial intentions, Coates’ navigation of American history’s perennial story/discourse problem—also known as the postulate of fabular apriority—through an openly multi-chronotopic narrative actively engages with the parameters of multiply traumatized history. Read this way, “History” itself appears in a multiplied form of interwoven stories whose meshwork requires a continual, partial, and evolving multiplex reading that we can see in Coates’ work. The hope that Coates


critiques is specifically the teleological hope of American progressivism that values its *telos* over the messy details in the middle of the narrative, and that wields its generalizing tendency against the immanent concerns of present traumas. We can see, then, that hope itself is a formal concern, and its politics change depending on the narrative form that it takes. Thinking in the theological terms of traumatic redemption, struggle is not necessarily opposed to hope; at the risk of sounding “hopeful” myself, struggle may instead be the very form that hope can take in the continually becoming worlds of trauma.
The day after Donald Trump won the 2016 presidential election, President Barack Obama delivered a statement to quell the shock of many Americans who had been unprepared for the possibility of a Trump administration. Anticipating his audience’s fear of political chaos, given this unpredicted outcome, Obama’s speech promises the continuation of order on a few interrelated counts.\footnote{While not altogether unpredictable, the election results were quite literally unpredicted, exacerbating the story/discourse crisis of the pollsters’ unprecedented mistake. (Ethan Siegel, “The Science of Error: How Polling Botched the 2016 Election,” \textit{Forbes}, November 9, 2016, accessed April 17, 2017, \url{https://www.forbes.com/sites/startswithabang/2016/11/09/the-science-of-error-how-polling-botched-the-2016-election/#641db69a3795}.)} Most tangibly, Obama relates that his and Trump’s administrations have already begun their “peaceful transition of power,” which he identifies as a “[hallmark] of our democracy”: just as George W. Bush welcomed Obama into the White House in 2008, Obama too will welcome Trump, proving that overall institutional order will remain intact regardless of any fleeting political turbulence that looks miniscule from the perspective of the big picture of the establishment.\footnote{Barack Obama, “November 9, 2016 Statement” (speech, Washington, DC, November, 9, 2016), National Archives and Record Administration, \url{https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2016/11/09/president-obama-speaks-results-election}.} Obama extends this presidential “mission” of “ma[king] a little progress” before “hand[ing the baton] off” beyond the executive position to incorporate the wider population in a universal narrative of American progress. Regardless of political leanings, he assures his audience that they are “actually all on one team” as Americans. Additionally, Obama invokes teleology in his assertion that “the path of this country has taken has never been a straight line.” This path is subject to interpretation as America “move[s] in ways that some people think is forward and others
think is backward,” but ultimately the “zig[zagging]” motion sustains the teleological progress machine.

This unflagging teleology has been a great asset for Obama, propelling his rise onto the national stage from his 2006 memoir *The Audacity of Hope* to his 2008 campaign slogans of “Hope,” “Change we can believe in,” and “Yes we can.”254, 255 In his book on *The Teleological Discourse of Barack Obama*, Richard Leeman traces how Obama’s characteristic “teleological discourse” fuses its Civil Rights and presidential inheritances to produce a particularly effective brand of inspirational rhetoric.256 As we have seen in his definition of teleology throughout this thesis, Leeman explains that Obama compels his audience’s through his teleology’s emphasis on “perfectability” over “perfection” and on the “pragmatism” of taking smaller, tangible steps attributed to the never-ending process of moving toward an unreachable telos.257 While this teleological approach has often worked to his benefit, Obama’s November 9th, 2016 speech reveals a narrative disjunction between discourse and story, as his teleological story-shape so obviously breaks apart under the new parameters of unprecedented political events.

Though unnamed, teleology became a central problem during the last election season when Donald Trump’s campaign explicitly rejected the American progressive legacy that so profoundly dominated the Obama era, epitomized in his slogan that promised to “Make America Great Again.”258 This language actively reroutes Obama’s

254 Leeman writes that Obama’s “teleological appeal provided the foundation for his electoral success in 2008” (*Teleological Discourse*, 50).
256 Leeman, *Teleological Discourse.*
257 Ibid., 12, 6.
258 See, for example, Donald Trump’s campaign website (Make America Great Again! Donald J Trump for President, accessed April 16, 2017, https://www.donaldjtrump.com.)
teleology by positing a telos in a past golden age that seems more tangible because it has allegedly been accomplished before. The slogan mirrors the universalizing work of Obama’s progressivism by grouping many American people—albeit a racially coded and exclusive fraction of the population—under a vaguely definitive national identity. Like the tropes of American civil religion that we examined in the Introduction, this “America” sustains its rhetorical power on both sides of the political spectrum by eluding precise definition. The new wave of Trumpism is unusually willing to divide discourse from story, as its leader and many key figures repeatedly make claims that conflict with indisputable facts: think, for example, of Kellyanne Conway’s fabrication of the Bowling Green Massacre, Ben Carson’s description of African slaves as “immigrants” who came to America to follow “dreams and opportunity,” and Sean Spicer’s claim that Adolf Hitler never used chemical weaponry. At the same time, Trump continues to criticize the media as for its “fake news,” adding to anxieties on all sides about the media’s power to warp the factual realities of the nation.

While their political positions and actions vastly differ, both Obama’s post-election speech and the Trump administration’s rocky relationship with “alternative facts” reveal a nationwide chronotopic crisis: for those who had not realized this before, the election and its aftermath have revealed a traumatized political climate inhabited by

different groups of Americans who narrate the nation differently. The stakes of this fragmented narration are quite high in the context of progressivism that cannot improve the world without deducing how that world works first. Similarly, the diagnostic logic of therapy requires identification of the psychological mechanisms of trauma in order to theorize ways of ameliorating traumatic suffering. This, after all, is not so different from an academic endeavor like this one that recalibrates terms in order to narrate a cohesive argument through them. The definitionally unknowable forms of trauma agitate these epistemological approaches and call for provisional and pluralized alternatives to diagnosis. The necessity for this kind of healing to know the world in order to respond to it is bolstered by a drive for unification as the necessary harbinger of action. The narratives of America espoused by the Obama and Trump camps alike emphasize their own primacy by claiming to better represent current events and how American ought to be. Here we see a shadow of the weapon of idolatry elucidated in Chapter Three, which cleaves to a singular truth by means of invalidating any alternative realities that nonetheless remain, if in silence. These alternate worldviews exacerbate the opposition between them and offer narrative responses—which we might consider as healing, redemption, and/or progress—based on limited chronotopes that forget the persistence of other time-spaces in the American paratext.

This failure of conflicting worldviews to reconcile into a singular American chronotope looks more complicated than “failure” when considered through the traumatic narrative forms with which this thesis grapples. We have seen that the spatial, dynamic, and spectral characteristics produce matrixial rather than linear narratives that suspend the tangle of ethical concerns of traumatic healing that cannot be reduced to a single cure-all narrative. Attending to these narrative complexities, we have moved
partially out of trauma’s hazardously authoritative name and into the forms of trauma that hold their own politics. Even as Monica Coleman and Ta-Nehisi Coates refrain from the explicit language of trauma studies, both illustrate traumatic elements of their respective worlds to reveal how the linear redemption narratives of triumphalist Christianity and the American Dream take on different story-shapes within the parameters of the paratextual world system that can account for the interacting chronotopes of trauma.

The attention to space-time that characterizes this thesis and its sources is integral to understanding traumatic forms beyond the confines of teleology. The metaphorical trauma of the election did not shatter the universal reality of the Dream but rather the illusion of the Dream, revealing a complex web of multiple and multiplying perspectives that have always percolated through it. This traumatic rupture compounds the teleological dilemma in which America continually finds itself with an allegedly progressive history that has been warped and multiplied by the traumas of racism, poverty, global violence, and other pasts and presents. Thinking through philosopher Édouard Glissant’s language, the tragedy of this delayed realization is in “the uncovering of what has gone unnoticed” when “the community feels” belatedly that expected order “has been broken.”260 This belatedness likewise exemplifies our prototypical definition of trauma as something that so overwhelms the individual or collective psyche that it must instead be processed later in an assortment of returning phenomena, mingling seemingly distinct moments in time.261

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261 See Chapter One, 27.
Stepping out into the sunlight on that surreal November morning, Obama began his speech with the playful yet earnest reminder that “the sun will [always] come up in the morning.” The implicit reassurance here is that no matter what happens, we at least have temporal order; and yet, as we have seen with trauma on individual, communal, and cultural levels, linearly ordered time is not always so reliable. Even as this claim reveals a consequential gap between his rosy discourse and its stressful subtext, Obama is not wrong about the immanent importance of time for trauma. While it seems at first blush that trauma interrupts narrative and narrative alters the non-language of trauma, the two instead co-create each other: trauma becomes a new kind of “speakable” in forms of time and space through language that is open to these fluctuations. Rather than trying and failing to rein in trauma with the promising ticking of temporal order, we might instead look at the provisional narratives—ones that we might call redemption, healing, or progress with alternate implications—that materialize in the murky dynamism of the multi-chronotopic present.

262 Writing on the traumatically informed novel Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), which incorporates embodied acts into the highly inventive discourse, Sally Bachner asks “How can any of this be meaningfully unspeakable when it has been communicated with such striking literary language?” We might ask a similar question as we think about trauma as it emerges in these spatiotemporal forms in addition to their linguistic representations. *(The Prestige of Violence*, 2.) Shelly Rambo makes a related claim about the “Theopoetics of Trauma” and its formal concerns. *(Chapter Two, 61.)*
APPENDIX

“Theologies of trauma,” in order of publication date (for full citations, see Bibliography):

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
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<tr>
<td>Greg Mogenson</td>
<td><em>God is a Trauma: Vicarious Religion and Soul-Making</em></td>
<td>1989</td>
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<td>Lynn Bridgers</td>
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