False Memories

Trauma and Liberation

"What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open."

Muriel Rukeyser

The structures of unequal power are many-layered and complex in the ways they function in the world. But at its root, oppression is really quite simple. It's about looting. The rest is made up of the rules and institutions, rituals and agreements, mythologies, rationales and overt bullying by means of which small groups of people keep a firm grasp on way more than their share of the world's resources.

But just as intense heat makes ripples and waves that distort our view of the road and give us the illusion of water when there is only hot asphalt, oppression of any kind tugs at the culture around it, distorting our view of the naked exercise of power, normalizing it so that it appears natural and tolerable. Making it look like the reason we're thirsty is not that we're being denied water, but our own lack of initiative in the midst of plenty.

Those with privilege cover up the bare bones of what they're up to with all kinds of elaborate theories and justifications, until they persuade themselves that living at the expense of other people is the right thing to do, a luxury they have earned by excellence, the natural way of life, the righteous and inevitable order of things. Some go so far as to convince themselves that exploitation is not only justifiable but a kind and
The compassionate expression of their superiority. These lies saturate our culture in ways both subtle and obvious.

The slavers who kidnapped millions of West African people, transported them under conditions that made a third of them die of the journey, gang-raped and tortured them, then sold them into lifelong unpaid labor—and the slave owners who bought them, worked them mercilessly, again raped them at will, routinely tortured them as punishment, sometimes for acts of resistance as small as looking a white man in the eye, sometimes merely to emphasize their power, and who, because of the work of slaves, led lives of leisure—found endless ways to justify their behavior, even to the extent of claiming that slavery was a civilizing influence on the lives of the enslaved. In a massive act of projection, they often described the African people who did every stitch of their work for them as lazy; seriously believed that slaves needed European people to set them tasks and make them useful. They even fantasized that had Europeans not enslaved them, African peoples would have died off from their inability to fend for themselves. After abolition, many ex-slave holders complained of the ingratitude of their former captives.

Or consider the almost hallucinatory fantasies of wealthy members of Congress that teenage African-American welfare mothers, a small minority of the welfare-receiving population, and consuming a minuscule fraction of the public budget, are responsible for bankrupting the economy, growing rich at public expense by having babies in order to pad their APDC checks. Excluded from decent employment and denied the most basic necessities so as not to slow down the astronomical rise in income of the top 10 percent, these young women are held publicly accountable for the pillaging of our common resources by the greedy.

The mechanism is the same whether we talk about individual or collective atrocities. Feminist psychologist Judith Herman describes the ways in which perpetrators seek to control disclosures of abuse:

In order to escape accountability for his crimes, the perpetrator does everything in his power to promote forgetting. Secrecy and silence are the perpetrator's first line of defense. If secrecy fails, the perpetrator attacks the credibility of his victim. If he cannot silence her absolutely, he tries to make sure no-one listens. To this end, he marshals an impressive array of arguments, from the most blatant denial to the most sophisticated and elegant rationalization. After every atrocity one can expect to hear the same predictable apologies: it never happened; the victim lies; the victim exaggerates; the victim brought it on herself; and in any case it is time to forget the past and move on. The more powerful the perpetrator, the greater his prerogative to name and define reality, and the more completely his arguments prevail.¹

Similarly, collective abuses—from the violence of poverty to police brutality, from colonial invasion to slavery to genocide—are denied, dismissed, blamed on the victims and erased from public discussion.

Such lies are part of the apparatus that justifies the massive accumulation by a few people of wealth beyond any human individual's needs. In order for the thing to work, the humanity of almost everyone must somehow be made invisible. Who could bear to hold privilege that meant the suffering and death of others if they had not been trained from early childhood to see these others as not real? Who would tolerate, for even an hour, the inhuman conditions imposed by the privileged, if they had not been trained from early childhood to feel themselves not fully entitled to life?²

The culture that inequality creates around itself is saturated with pain, confusion, alienation, a sense of the unreality of our own experience and that of others, an inability to name the abuses we experience, perpetrate and witness on a daily basis. Part of what leaves us numb is the massive scale on which these abuses occur. We are a society of people living in a state of post-traumatic shock: amnesiac, dissociated, continually distracting ourselves from the repetitive injuries of widespread collective violence.

When individual people are abused, the events themselves become a story of our worthlessness, of our deserving no better. We must struggle to re-create the shattered knowledge of our humanity. It is in retelling the stories of victimization, recasting our roles from subhuman scapegoats to beings full of dignity and courage, that this becomes possible. The struggle we engage in is over whose story will triumph, the rapist's story or the raped woman's, the child abuser's or the child's, the stories of bigoted police officers or those of families of color whose children are being murdered. The stories of perpetrators are full of lies and justifications, full of that same projection that holds the abused responsible for her abuse. The stories of the abused are full of dangerous, subversive revelations that undermine the whole fabric of inequality.

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Memory, individual and collective, is clearly a significant site of social struggle. The "false memory" movement that seeks to deny authority over memory to sexual abuse survivors; escalating attacks on multicultural education, particularly in the teaching of history; revisions of Holocaust history that deny it took place, are all examples of current public debates over control of memory. All involve a backlash against powerful popular movements to reclaim authority.
The past is a powerful resource with which to explain and justify the present and create agendas for the future. The frequency with which adult women report that they were sexually abused by their families as children requires a story. That story must either radically redefine how the nature of family is understood in popular culture, or locate responsibility for these reports in the psyches of the women making them. Feminists have sought to do the first, and the false memory movement has sought, by inventing a new category of invalid experience, to do the latter.

Multicultural education—particularly the revision of history and literature curricula to include the presence and voices of women, people of color, poor and working-class people, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people—grew out of broad social movements that erupted in this country during the 1960s, '70s and early '80s and that responded to decolonization processes internationally. Women's Studies, Ethnic Studies, LGBT Studies and the various ways in which working-class culture and thought have been slipped into curricula have presented major challenges to elite control of knowledge, to what story is told about U.S. society.

As the movements that created such academic disciplines have weakened, attacks on multiculturalism have increased. As in the case of the false memory movement, the privileged accuse the disempowered of oppressing them. Multiculturalism violates the "freedom" of privileged white heterosexual men by forcing them to participate in a world in which their interests and perceptions are not the exclusive priority of everyone.

Those who have considered it their private preserve to decide what is and isn't knowledge, art or culture have persuaded themselves that our determination to define these things for ourselves is a threat to their interests. In reality, it's their best chance for survival. The narrow mythologies upon which they have based their lives will not see them through another century. The denial of our interrelatedness is killing this planet and too many of its people.

Holocaust revision, the story that accuses Jews of manufacturing the history of Nazi atrocities and genocide as a bid for power and "special privileges," uses a similar reversal whereby Nazi Germany becomes the victim of those Jews who survived the attempt to exterminate them. The Holocaust is seeing evidence of what theories of genetic inferiority, what the dehumanizing of whole populations can bring about. As we experience a rising visibility and popularity of such ideologies once again, both at the level of neo-Nazi organizing and within scientific debates on the role of genetics in shaping our lives, there is a clear incentive for supporters of these ideologies to erase the well-documented and horrifying realities of the Holocaust and replace them with an account that again places the story in the psyche of the victim, rather than in the world.

For Jews, for incest survivors, for all the people systematically excluded from official histories, the issue is the same. Oppression, whether on the massive social scale of the Holocaust or in the power abuses of incest within one home, is deeply traumatic. Traumatized individuals and communities experience themselves as dehumanized by abuse. The story told by the actions of the perpetrators is that those who are targeted are not human beings. Evidence that such a belief is a central ingredient in oppressor ideology, and essential, in fact, to carrying out their programs, is to be found everywhere, from Nazi propaganda to slave-holder mythology to the persistent belief that women ask for and enjoy rape.

Because I am in multiple ways the target of such dehumanization, I read history books with the skepticism of an incest survivor at a family gathering. I watch everyone's hands. I know the purpose of many of the stories being told is to establish the appropriateness of sacrificing me and my peoples to someone else's interests. Recovery from trauma requires creating and telling another story about the experience of violence and the nature of the participants, a story powerful enough to restore a sense of our own humanity to the abused.

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Our capacity as a society to think about traumatic events and their effect on people has been disrupted by both the silencing imposed on us by perpetrators and the effects of trauma itself. The tendency is for prolonged abuse to become normalized, and even more so when it is perpetrated on a collective scale by those with the greatest power. Judith Herman looks at the checkered past of the psychological study of trauma, describing it as one of "episodic amnesia."

Periods of active investigation have alternated with periodic oblivion. Repeatedly in the past century, similar lines of inquiry have been taken up and abruptly abandoned, only to be rediscovered much later... This intermittent amnesia is not the result of the ordinary changes in fashion that affect any intellectual pursuit. The study of psychological trauma does not languish for lack of interest. Rather, the subject provokes such intense controversy that it periodically becomes anathema. The study of psychological trauma has repeatedly led into realms of the unthink-able and foundered on fundamental questions of belief.
This is because examining psychological trauma inevitably leads us to the most widespread source of trauma, which is oppression. Therefore, it is only in the context of social movements opposing oppression that psychological trauma can really be examined. Herman argues:

The systematic study of psychological trauma therefore depends on the support of a political movement. Indeed, whether such a study can be pursued or discussed in public is itself a political question. The study of war trauma becomes legitimate only in a context that challenges the sacrifice of young men in war. The study of trauma in sexual and domestic life becomes legitimate only in the context that challenges the subordination of women and children. Advances in the field occur only when they are supported by a political movement powerful enough to legitimate an alliance between investigators and patient and to counteract the ordinary social processes of silencing and denial. In the absence of strong political movements for human rights, the active process of bearing witness inevitably gives way to the active process of forgetting. Repression, dissociation, and denial are phenomena of social as well as individual consciousness.

Denial and amnesia, repression and the dissociation that keeps our perceptions fragmented so they will not reveal the terrible whole—all of these must be overcome in order for the stories of the traumatized to occupy public space.

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Healing takes place in community, in the telling and the bearing witness, in the naming of trauma and in the grief and rage and defiance that follow. In *Trauma and Recovery* Judith Herman draws from the experiences of women and men traumatized by many different kinds of events, from rape and battering to combat, from kidnapping to incest. She has found that both the effects of trauma and the recovery process from it are largely consistent across all categories of trauma. If abuse is in fact only the local manifestation of oppression, then such stages of individual recovery should also hold true for collective processes of recovery.

The significant difference, however, between a local manifestation of oppression such as incest or battering in a home and societal abuses such as racism, poverty or homophobia is the possibility of leaving the abusive situation. For individuals, recovery generally begins at the point where the abuse has been escaped or stopped. Collectively, we are often attempting to recover from abuses that are ongoing, and the only context in which recovery is possible is one of active opposition. Taking action, saying no to oppression, is an essential first step.

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A stance of opposition creates a small liberated territory, a psychological space in which we can act on the belief that we deserve complete freedom and dignity even when achieving such freedom collectively is still out of reach. The refusal to cooperate with our dehumanization even when we may not yet be able to stop it increases our reserves of dignity and hope. In that moment we have begun the process of recovery—of reclaimed humanity—that is both the ultimate outcome and the most essential ingredient of our liberation. And although there is a critical role for allies in bearing witness to and taking a strong moral stance against the abuse, this activism must be by the traumatized on their own behalf.

Writing of the therapeutic relationship for traumatized individuals, Herman states that the client must be "author and arbiter of her own recovery... No intervention that takes power away from the survivor can possibly foster her recovery, no matter how much it appears to be in her immediate best interest." I am reminded of a quote from an unidentified Australian aboriginal woman activist, "If you have come here to help me then you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine then let us work together."

What is clinically referred to as diagnosis, the naming of the problem, is the essential stage of reconnecting symptom and cause, pain and its source. Identifying the cause-and-effect relationships between nightmares and incest, depression and violation of any kind, fear and the experience of violence, releases the traumatized from the business-as-usual dental that these things can reasonably be expected to have an impact. My own relief at the discovery, in therapy, that my inability to sleep, or the persistent intrusive violent images that thrust their way into my mind were a common, known and documented response to severe abuse was identical with what I felt in my first women's consciousness-raising group. As each woman in turn spoke about her life and we recognized how much we had in common, we became able to identify the sources of our anger, frustration and self-doubt in the treatment we had received at the hands of men. Our exhilaration came from the realization that our pain was not after all a character flaw but a direct result of systematic injustice and that our reactions made complete sense. Oppressed communities have created many forms—from support groups to written testimony, from "speak bitterness" sessions to autobiographical anthologies—through which the connections between conditions of oppression and their impact on the oppressed can be made explicit and public. While the false memory theorists attempt to establish that pain is ahistoric and traumas leave no trace of themselves in our lives,
the traumatized keep finding ways to insist that pain has documentable origins, that when someone is hit, it hurts, and that injuries leave scars.

Without this naming process, the effects of trauma come to seem like personal flaws or cultural defects, inborn in the traumatized, not violently created. Survivors of long-term abuse, unable to identify the external sources of self-hatred, shame, anger and fear, may pose a significant danger to themselves through direct self-harming, passive failures of self-protection, or an intense and pathological dependence on the abuser. Traumatized communities certainly enact these same behaviors. Internalizing the perpetrator’s rationalizations, they may come to believe they are the source of their own problems and treat themselves and each other with disrespect and violence. Drug abuse, alcoholism, gang violence, domestic violence and a stupefied sense of what is possible can all be seen as a result of the inability to identify the causes of pain and take an active stance to end them. Only when we are able to take in the cumulative impact of slavery, lynching and other forms of organized violence, enforced poverty and segregation and the systematic denial of opportunities to African Americans can we find ways to talk about the violence inflicted by young Black men upon each other as caused, not inherent.

Speaking of individual trauma patients, Herman writes:

The question of what is wrong with them has often become hopelessly muddled and ridden with moral judgement... A conceptual framework that relates the patient’s problems with identity and relationships to the trauma history provides a useful basis for the formation of a therapeutic alliance—this framework both recognizes the harmful nature of the abuse and provides a reasonable explanation for the patient’s persistent difficulties.6

In order to establish a culture of resistance, a climate in which the oppressed are able to diagnose our own ills as the effects of oppression, we need a body of diagnostic know-how, a tradition of recognizing and understanding in detail the harmful nature of oppression.

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The way we are taught our history is an endless repetition of the perpetrator’s story, in which crusaders are shining knights, not massacring mercenaries, wars are glorious, conquerors noble and as far back as we can see, the past unrolls in an infinite time line of thrones, treaties and battles, and the acquisition of exciting new markets and territories. For the subjugated and colonized, the presentation of such a story as one of admirable accomplishments is an added injury. Just as the individual recovering from abuse must reconstruct the story of her undeserved suffering in a way that gives it new meaning, and herself a rebuilt and invulnerable sense of worth, the victims of collective abuse need ways to reconstruct history in a way that restores a sense of our inherent value as human beings, not simply in our usefulness to the goals of the elites.

When individuals take on such projects of recovery we often find it far more challenging than we may have expected. Herman writes, “Denial makes them feel crazy, but facing the full reality seems beyond what any human can bear.”7 The heart of the challenge is to assimilate the terrible, the unbearable, transforming it into something that can be integrated; something that can nourish us and leave us with a vision of the world, of ourselves, of humanity, that is bigger than the horror.

What is so dreadful is that to transform the traumatic we must re-enter it fully, and allow the full weight of grief to pass through our hearts. It is not possible to digest atrocity without tasting it first, without assessing on our tongues the full bitterness of it. Ours is a society that does not do grief well or easily, and what is required to face trauma is the ability to mourn, fully and deeply, all that has been taken from us. But mourning is painful and we resist giving way to it, distract ourselves with put-on toughness out of pride.

Herman talks about all the ways individuals resist mourning. Out of pride because we will not give them the satisfaction. Through fantasies of revenge rooted in a sense of helplessness, as if perpetrating abusive acts ourselves would restore our power. Through dreams of absolution in which the impact of abuse is erased by an act of love and the abuser is finally repentant. Through fantasies of compensation that allow us to avoid the truth, which is that nothing can ever compensate us.

But only through mourning everything we have lost can we discover that we have in fact survived; that our spirits are indestructible. Only through mourning can we reach a place of clean anger in which we stand with all the abused and hold the abusers accountable. Only through mourning can we reconnect to the love in our lives and lose our fascination with the ones who harmed us. And only if we fully acknowledge and grieve the hurts can we possibly find genuine compassion for the perpetrators. Mourning is the only way to honor what was lost, and only by renouncing all hope of restitution are we free to grieve.

What does grief have to do with history? Everything. In the early 1980s my mother wrote “Concepts of Pollution” about her experience studying anthropology:
Did you know Levi-Strauss wrote an essay on the pregnant boy myths of the Pawnee Indians, myths about how some boys got supernatural help to become doctors—so called medicine men—without a word about doctoring among the Pawnees in the 1800's, without a word about the desperate hopelessness of it with people dying of all the diseases of starvation, the hungry, cold winters and the attacks of the Sioux? ...And I was there to be a scholar, there to be an anthropologist. Not there to be a person, a woman. Not there to care that I was Puerto Rican, a child of Taíno Indians, of Spaniards, of African slaves. Not there to question, to argue. Not there to identify Not there to cry. Certainly not there to cry. No wonder I drank... I'd write after staying up drinking, talking to myself in the mirror, shouting angrily...Then I would write about Pawnees dying in the thin winter sunlight, coughing up blood, or Polynesians dying on the beach in the Pacific, shot by passing whalers, or caduveo dying of Spanish gunshot. I wrote about Wounded Knee and Canyon de Chelly, places I had names for, and all the beaches and valleys and rocky plains in Africa, in Canada, in Australia, on the Pacific Islands, on the Caribbean islands, in tropical South America, in Arctic North America, places for which I had no names. A soundless litany of death... Drink deadens the pain, and now I don't drink and the pain returns undeadened, unalloyed, clear and punishing. How can I bear it? How do you mourn endless numbers of people in endless numbers of places? Is there a form for it, a requisite time and place for mourning? Is there ever an end to it?  

The only way to bear the overwhelming pain of oppression is by telling, in all its detail, in the presence of witnesses and in a context of resistance, how unbearable it is. If we attempt to craft resistance without undertaking this task, we are collectively vulnerable to all the errors of judgment that unresolved trauma generates in individuals. It is part of our task as revolutionary people, people who want deep-rooted, radical change, to be as whole as it is possible for us to be. This can only be done if we face the reality of what oppression really means in our lives, no: as abstract systems subject to analysis, but as an avalanche of traumas leaving a wake of devastation in the lives of real people who nevertheless remain human, unquenchable, complex and full of possibility.

Radical history has the potential to do this work. Radical historians, whether academically taught or trained in the storytelling traditions of their communities, have the ability to do for communities of the oppressed what a witness-bearing, morally committed therapist can do for an individual hurt past bearing by abuse. We gather and retell the stories of our side of history, free of the self-serving rationalizations of the looters. In the face of every act or word that would strip us of it, we tell, in all its anguish and beauty, the story of our ineradicable humanity.