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Simone Drichel

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Towards a “radical acceptance of vulnerability”: Postcolonialism and Deconstruction

Simone Drichel

The possibility for the home to open to the Other is as essential to the essence of the home as closed doors and windows.

—Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*

The “virus of deconstruction”

Reflecting on Jacques Derrida’s lasting influence on a range of intellectual, cultural, social, and political practices, Derek Attridge opens his 2005 essay “Deconstruction Today” with a most intriguing hypothetical scenario, asking,

What would a map of deconstruction today look like? If deconstruction is, as both its enemies and its friends have claimed, a kind of virus, and we might be able to produce—on the model of the mappings you might see in a treatise on global diseases—a large chart of the intellectual world with its presence marked in red, how would the result appear? (42)

Spinning this hypothetical scenario further by, as he says, adding “another colour, say blue, to signal the presence of an antibody fiercely resisting the virus of deconstruction,” Attridge suggests that the map of deconstruction has changed dramatically over the last thirty years. Where an early map would have displayed intense spots of red and blue, spots that were limited to the disciplinary domains of philosophy and literature and the geographical space of France and the United States, “today,” he says, “the map would look very different”:

Rather than red dots we would have to paint large areas of many countries and many disciplines in varying shades of pink, to show how widely deconstruction has permeated intellectual and creative activity even when no direct acknowledgement is made. Superimposed on the pink would be the red dots indicating the large number of teachers and scholars around the globe whose work is influenced directly by deconstruction; these would be more numerous, if perhaps more scattered, than in 1975. There would be fewer blue areas, though many would still be as intense. (44)

In other words, thirty-odd years after its very localized emergence in France and the United States, the “virus of deconstruction” has spread

to and infiltrated every corner of the globe, leaving only isolated pockets of resistance to its global conquest.

Why open this essay—which seeks to address the question of vulnerability via the vexed relationship between deconstruction and postcolonial studies—with what even Attridge himself acknowledges to be a “rather contrived metaphor” (44)? The answer is simple: contrived though it may be, Attridge’s metaphor of a map of the world being colored in with more and more red dots is intensely evocative in the context of postcolonial studies, where it cannot but conjure up a familiar image of imperialist take-over of the world through British rule. Just as the red dots of deconstruction have, according to Attridge, now spread virus-like beyond its original confines, so British rule once dotted the imperial map well beyond the geographical borders of “Mother England.” Somewhat surprisingly, Attridge himself does not draw this all-too-obvious parallel between what is ultimately a highly imperialist metaphor and an actual imperial history. Although he focuses on the field of postcolonial studies—as one of the areas “in which deconstruction [. . .] made a formative contribution” (49)—he is not at all self-reflexive about the use of an imperialist metaphor in this context. Even as he proceeds to sketch the “Derridean influence on postcolonial studies” (48), he appears to be oblivious to the fact that, in doing so, he is implicitly associating not just deconstruction but also, by implication, the deconstructive strand of postcolonial studies with imperialist practices. A deconstructive postcolonialism, by involuntary association, here becomes an ideologically complicit extension of imperialism. Had Attridge been aware of this implied complicity, he might have had rather more to say about the postcolonial “blue dots”—the antibodies—that resist “the virus of deconstruction.” Granted, he does acknowledge that “[r]unning counter to the Derridean influence on postcolonial studies is a strong current of resistance by those who feel that the pursuit of ‘theory’ has been to the detriment of material analysis and actual achievements on the ground” (48); however, after a brief paragraph in which he juxtaposes “materialist” critic Benita Parry and “post-structuralist” critic Robert Young, he rather off-handedly—and to my mind unsatisfactorily—concludes, “This is a debate that will undoubtedly continue” (49). What his nonchalance perhaps brushes over all too quickly is how fiercely this debate has held postcolonial studies in its grip; as Jane Hiddleston, for example, reminds us in the opening sentence of her recent monograph *Poststructuralism and Postcoloniality*, “The interpenetration of poststructuralism and postcoloniality has been a subject of extensive and heated debate” (1). Given the sheer historical weight and ongoing force behind this debate, the carelessness (or naivety?) with which Attridge maps the “virus of

deconstruction" in terms of a global conquest seems astounding: how is it possible for a South African-born Derrida scholar to have been oblivious, or indifferent, to the fact that the use of this metaphor in a postcolonial context would feed right into the hands of those who like nothing better than to proclaim and lament what John Hawley, in a recent article, calls "The Colonizing Impulse of Postcolonial Theory"?

This question, or variations of this question, stayed with me for a long time; they bothered me: nagged and irritated me because no easy answer presented itself. And it is perhaps partly in response to Attridge's curious oversight that this present article has taken shape, provisional and unwieldy as its shape may be. I want to begin, then, by taking his metaphor seriously. I want to begin, that is, by asking what the points of continuity might be between the two "mappings": what is it about deconstruction that it should lend itself so readily to being mapped as a threatening neo-imperial aggressor ready to take over and devastate the field of postcolonial studies? For it seems to me that considerably more might be at stake here than the oft-repeated charge that a deconstructive postcolonialism is more interested in "playing with texts instead of politics" and that it has thereby "rendered itself much less important than it could be (or could have been)" (Hawley 771). Surely, if this love affair with textuality really did render deconstructive postcolonial work ineffectual, if not altogether irrelevant, the debate would have been little more than a tempest in a teacup. Or, more simply put, if deconstruction truly was harmless, one would have trouble presenting it convincingly as a scary imperial monster (or neo-imperial monster-virus) that threatens to take over the world. What interests me here is precisely that deconstruction is so *easily* solicited for the part of scary monster: it makes me wonder what fundamental fear—what vulnerability—it triggers in the field.

The quickest entry into this discussion might be to consider what it is deconstruction attacks, or where its force lies. Many possibilities come to mind here, but I am drawn to the one offered by Michael Naas, who suggests that "deconstruction has never been anything but a deconstruction of the *autos*" (20). In other words, deconstruction is nothing if not an attack on identitarian thought: this is where its power lies. But it is an ambivalent power, of course—a power that is also a threat: a "virus" that threatens to infect and thereby undo the integrity or boundedness of the *autos*. The implications of such an unraveling for the field of postcolonial studies perhaps emerge more clearly when we take Naas's added thoughts into consideration:

In *Rogues* Derrida names this conjunction of self and sovereignty *ipseity*—from the Latin *ipse*, a word often used to translate the Greek *autos*. Insofar as freedom is grounded in ipseity, it cannot be thought apart from a whole series of *auto*- terms that define the self's or the subject's

ability to return to and assert itself in its freedom. The self is thus *autonomous* only to the extent that it is *automobilic* and *autotelic*, that is, only to the extent that it can of itself, by itself, give itself its own law with its own self in view. (20)

What the deconstruction of the *autos* amounts to is hence a questioning of the conjunction of the self or identity with sovereignty: freedom and independence. Bluntly: without the *autos* there can be no *autonomy*. And without even the possibility of autonomy—without the aspiration to some form of meaningful independence from the former colonizing power—it becomes difficult to imagine quite what postcolonialism might strive for. The *autos*—the self, identity—lies at the heart of postcolonial claims to resistance, independence, sovereignty, etc., and this is what deconstruction calls into question: no wonder it appears as an insidious intruder that gets under what Sara Ahmed so evocatively calls “the skin of the community,” and against which it is therefore vital to develop immunity. In the language of Attridge’s metaphor: deconstruction cannot but appear as a nasty “virus,” threatening to infect and hence further weaken, if not eradicate altogether, a sense of self that, in the wake of colonialism, is already much embattled and precariously fragile. That it should be so easy to map deconstruction as a world-conquering virus makes sense now, for the terror of deconstruction lies precisely in the fact that it scratches the scab of an old wound and reveals the raw *vulnus*, the core vulnerability, that lies underneath. Attacking the *autos*, deconstruction cannot but rekindle latent memories of a prior traumatized state—a colonial shattering of identity, or a wound inscribed at the heart of an identity no longer coinciding with itself—the recurrence of which is being anxiously defended against. In fact, asked whether she thought of deconstruction as “a declaration of war, or the celebration of a victory over the grand récits,” Gayatri Spivak responds, “I think of it myself as a radical acceptance of vulnerability” (18). It is precisely this acceptance of vulnerability that, I suggest, is at stake—is resisted—here in these persistent associations of deconstruction with a neo-imperial takeover; in other words, my suspicion is that what postcolonialism’s conflicted relationship with deconstruction is about, at heart, is its own unresolved trauma and lingering vulnerability: a vulnerability that, rather than being “radically accepted,” is being defended against at all cost.

Defense . . . against the Defense

Carrying on with the biological metaphor, I want to read this defense maneuver, with Derrida, as an instance not of self-protective immunization against a potential viral infection, but of self-destructive *autoimmunization*.¹ In other words, I want to suggest that what might look like a defense on behalf of the postcolonial *autos* to protect an embat-

tled sense of self against the dangers of deconstruction turns out to be a defense against the defense, and thus further erodes the very sense of self the defense was supposed to protect. My argument, in brief, is that the traumatic experience of colonial violence, which did not just exploit and disown colonized peoples but also placed their cultural identities under severe threat, gave rise to certain defense mechanisms. As is the case in an individual's psychic trauma, these defense mechanisms were mounted so as to defend against a repetition of this traumatic past and prevent a further violation of an already fragile sense of self. Instead, however, it is these defenses themselves that now get compulsively repeated against imagined threats coming from the outside—which leads not to increased safety for the threatened self, but to a further erosion of its sense of safety in the world. As Alice Andrews puts it, in a moving essay that channels her own experience with autoimmune illness, “[w]ith the onset of autoimmune disease the immune system shoots itself in the foot, enacting an over-active, over-the-top defence of itself, which destroys the body's own tissues via its own biological death-drive” (193).² What this means is that, as Derrida's analysis of autoimmunity in the context of the post-9/11 US “war on terror” illustrates so compellingly, the threat ultimately lies on the inside rather than on the outside, and the very defense against the purported external threat will regenerate rather than eradicate it. As he says,

It cannot be said that humanity is defenseless against the threat of this evil. But we must recognize that defenses and all forms of what is called, with two equally problematic words, the “war on terrorism” work to regenerate, in the short or long term, the causes of the evil they claim to eradicate. (Borradori 100)

The defense against an imagined external threat, in other words, turns out to be a defense against the defense: an autoimmune response. Thus, if the experience of trauma leads to a repetition compulsion where the traumatized psyche perpetually returns to the past, to the site of the original trauma, in an attempt to master it belatedly, *nachträglich*, this repetition compulsion sees the incessant creation of imaginary external enemies—scary monsters—with which it then restages this original trauma. In Andrews's words,

The traumatic event is repeated in order to master it, to create in retrospect the anxiety whose absence was the cause of the traumatic neurosis. Therefore, in attempting to protect itself, the organism infects itself over and over again with the memory of the outside force that threatened and continues to threaten it in order to incorporate that threat into the organism, to bring it to conscious recollection in order that it may no longer threaten. This repetitive seeing therefore acts as an immunization, attempting to provide resistance and defence against any repeat attack. (192)

However, it is precisely this incessant restaging and re-enacting that prevents the mastery—the working through—of the trauma because it ties the organism to the traumatic past instead of opening it up to an unforeseeable future: with the ultimate result that what keeps the psyche traumatised is its own defensive response, so that “self-defence becomes self-attack” (Andrews 193). The threat here clearly comes from the inside rather than the outside: one could almost call it a bad case of transference neurosis!

Gaping Wounds

With the name Freud now all but hovering on the edges of our awareness, a revisitation of Freudian conceptions of trauma is undoubtedly called for. But let me delay the inevitable return to Freud just slightly and begin, or begin again, via another detour: a detour through the question of colonial trauma and through Levinas. Although numerous other examples of colonial trauma could of course be given, I want to recall here the scene that, perhaps more than any other, has come to emblemize the traumatic shattering of identity associated with colonization: Frantz Fanon’s recollection, in the opening lines of “The Fact of Blackness”—arguably the central chapter in *Black Skin, White Masks*—of becoming the object of a white child’s fearful gaze:

“Dirty nigger!” Or simply, “Look, a Negro!”
I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things,
my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and
then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects. (109)

These lines—“Look, a Negro”—reverberate traumatically through the first few pages of the chapter. They lead Fanon to “discover” his blackness, a discovery that finds him “battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism [sic], racial defects, slave ships, and above all else, above all: ‘Sho’ good eatin’” (112). Haunted by what he, a little later, calls “a galaxy of erosive stereotypes” (129), Fanon considers this encounter with the violent white gaze the original moment of self-alienation and objectification: “On that day, completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object” (112). “Sealed into that crushing objecthood,” Fanon—the black man, the colonized other—undergoes a shattering of spontaneous, taken-for-granted self-experience. Thrown into a feeling of “nonbeing,” he loses himself, with the lost “I” reappearing as “another self.” In a haunting passage, deserving of being quoted at length, he recalls this traumatic shattering and alienated reconstitution:

Sealed into that crushing objecthood, I turned beseechingly to others.
Their attention was a liberation, running over my body suddenly
abraded into nonbeing, endowing me once more with an agility that I

had thought lost, and by taking me out of the world, restoring me to it. But just as I reached the other side, I stumbled, and the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye. I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together by another self. (109)

The traumatic encounter with the colonial gaze here produces a fundamental shattering of identity; it creates a self who will forever carry the scars of that shattering and whose self-experience is irrevocably split: "I am being dissected under white eyes," he says (116). This self is now an "I" that has the external "eye" inscribed into its sense of itself, into its very skin, and is therefore always split and double: black skin, white masks. "'Black skin, white masks' is not," Homi Bhabha emphasizes, "a neat division; it is a doubling, dissembling image of being in at least two places at once" (44). Subject and object both at once, the "I" seeks to heal the breach through covering the shameful "fact of blackness": "The black man wants to be like the white man. For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white" (Fanon 109). But, he says, "that was a joke" (109); the split remains, finding expression in the space of "ambivalent identification" which, according to Bhabha, is inscribed in the central image of "black skin, white masks" (62).

How do we respond—politically, ethically—to this traumatic shattering and dissembling? How do we (ad)dress the wound and the split it inscribes in identity?³ Reflecting on this question, I found myself drawn to Emmanuel Levinas's rich and complex understanding of the conjunction between trauma and ethics. In what we might call a traumatological conception of ethical subjectivity, Levinas conceives of the ethical relationship itself as traumatic and of the ethical subject as categorically open, exposed, or vulnerable to the appeal of the other. The reason that the subject is unable to remain closed to the appeal of the other lies in what Simon Critchley calls the self's "affective disposition towards alterity," which, he says, "is the condition of possibility for the ethical relation to the other" (100). Stella Sandford describes this affective relation with alterity as being "*outside* of enjoyment" and marked by the fact that "the sensible 'resists'" (116, 17). The sensible refuses to be appropriated—introjected—by the subject; or, rather, if there is any kind of introjection, it is a deeply decentring, disturbing, wounding kind of introjection, an introjection that causes the subject to implode under the force of what Levinas describes as the "'putting' of the Infinite into" finite subjectivity. In an evocative passage that stands in for many others of its kind, Levinas likens this implosion, among other things, to the burning of skin under the touch of the ungraspable:

The *in* of the Infinite designates the depth of the affecting by which subjectivity is affected through this "putting" of the Infinite into it, without prehension or comprehension. It designates the depth of an undergoing

that no capacity comprehends, that no foundation any longer supports, where every process of investing fails and where the screws that fix the stern of inwardness burst. This putting in without a corresponding recollecting devastates its site like a devouring fire, catastrophizing its site [. . .]. It is a dazzling, where the eye takes more than it can hold, an igniting of the skin which touches and does not touch what is beyond the graspable, and burns. (*Basic Philosophical Writings* 139)

Elsewhere he speaks of a “deafening trauma” to evoke a similar sense of the affectively exposed subject being overwhelmed by an exteriority it cannot contain (*Otherwise than Being* 111). As these powerful images impress upon us, the subject’s affective disposition towards an ungraspable alterity is a traumatic disposition: a disposition that threatens to traumatize, to wound, the subject. The ego, Levinas says, “is an irritability, a susceptibility, or an exposure to wounding and outrage” (*Basic Philosophical Writings* 86). The result of such constitutional vulnerability is, in Critchley’s words, “an internally divided or split self.” Reading Levinas through Freud, Critchley suggests that “under the effect of the traumatism of persecution, the deafening shock or the violence of trauma, the subject becomes an internally divided or split self, an interiority that is radically non-self-coincidental, a gaping wound that will not heal” (101).

Painful as it may sound, this “gaping wound that will not heal,” a wound that appears to align the Levinasian ethical self with the split colonized subject, is to be defended as the bedrock of ethics in Levinas’s vision. For Levinas, this vulnerability, this “exposure to wounding and outrage,” is the precondition for ethics: exposed to and defenseless before the other, the ethical subject is pure affectivity; unable to shut itself off against the other, it cannot evade the responsibility it is assigned by (and for) the other. It is hence—and Judith Butler, as I suggest in the Introduction, makes much of this—this very inability to keep itself safe, this constitutional vulnerability, that guarantees its ethical responsiveness. “Consciousness,” Critchley emphasizes, “is the effect of an affect, and this affect is trauma” (93, emphasis in original). “But,” he hastens to add, “this is a *good thing*,” because “without a relation to trauma, or at least without a relation to that which claims, calls, commands, summons, interrupts or troubles the subject [. . .], there would be no ethics” (101, emphasis in original). According to Critchley, “It is only because the subject is unconsciously constituted through the trauma of contact with the real that we might have the audacity to speak of goodness, transcendence, compassion, etc.” (101). Moreover, traumatic subjectivity is invested with all the liberating power of transcendence in Levinas’s work—the “in” in the finite—allowing Rudi Visker, for example, to go as far as to say that “The Other does not enslave but liberates, awakens, disillusiones, purifies, and elevates. One cannot but conclude: the Other brings me a trauma which heals” (84).

How, then, do we render the Levinasian investment in the liberating power of this open wound, this traumatic disposition, productive for its apparent structural parallel in the colonial subject's sense of itself as fundamentally fragmented, split, and alienated, in fact, as being—as Levinas says of the ethical subject—"ill at ease in one's own skin" (*Otherwise than Being* 108)? I say apparent here because there are of course different levels of analysis in operation: Levinas speaks of an "original traumatism" (*Basic Philosophical Writings* 90), a traumatism that cannot be brought to consciousness because it precedes ontology, while the trauma I evoke here is tied to memorable historical events. And yet, although they appeal to different levels of analysis, the structural parallel is perhaps intriguing enough for us to explore a little further what deeper resonances might be found between the trauma at the heart of ethical subjectivity and the trauma suffered at the hands of colonization. At its most pointed—and I am rushing to the point here purely in the interests of space—this is perhaps a question about the possibility of gleaning something enabling from the trauma of colonization: an audacious question, perhaps, and a question that asks whether it might be possible to think of the trauma of colonization in the way Levinas thinks of the traumatic encounter with the face of the other: as a trauma which expropriates, splits, and denucleates the ego and, ultimately, as a "trauma which heals."

The simple answer seems to be no. Instead of finding anything enabling in the "gaping wound that will not heal," colonized peoples have generally been doing their best to attempt to heal the wound: breach the split at the heart of their identity. The widespread investments in a strong identity politics, which we witnessed throughout the postcolonial world, speak only too clearly of determined efforts to rebuild a fragmented *autos* and patch up the wound. These efforts, I want to propose, were a defense of vulnerability, but not in the way Levinas would defend vulnerability (as the condition of possibility of ethical subjectivity). How do we understand the psychological motivation behind this *non-Levinasian* defense of vulnerability? And is there any way that these two kinds of defenses of vulnerability and associated framings of trauma—as something that *heals*, on the one hand, or as something that needs to *be healed*, on the other—can be brought into conversation? Allow me—after this extended detour—to return to the proper name that was hovering on the edges of our awareness a little earlier: Freud. The Freudian account of trauma, I suggest, may prove instructive in trying to answer these questions.

A Protective Shield against Stimuli

"In Freud's time," Siegfried and Florian D. Zepf remind us, "the term 'trauma' referred to a violent attack damaging the organism from the outside" (331). Freud's own, more specific, definition of trauma—at least as articulated in his 1920 essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle"—re-

fers to the breaching of a “protective shield” against external stimuli. He uses the evocative metaphor of the psyche as a single-celled organism, a vesicle, with an outer membrane or “crust” that shields this organism from external influences:

Let us picture a living organism in its most simplified possible form as an undifferentiated vesicle of a substance that is susceptible to stimulation. Then the surface turned towards the external world will from its very situation be differentiated and will serve as an organ for receiving stimuli. [. . .] It would be easy to suppose, then, that as a result of the ceaseless impact of external stimuli on the surface of the vesicle, its substance to a certain depth may have become permanently modified, so that excitatory processes run a different course in it from what they run in the deeper layers. A crust would thus be formed which would at last have been so thoroughly “baked through” by stimulation that it would present the most favourable possible conditions for the reception of stimuli and become incapable of any further modification. (“Beyond the Pleasure Principle” 26)

Psychic health, for Freud, is reliant on this “crust” being able to do its “work of filtering material from the outside world, processing nutrients, repelling toxins, and retaining the integrity of its borders” (Luckhurst 9). The “crust,” in other words, functions as a “protective shield” for the organism: “This little fragment of living substance is suspended in the middle of an external world charged with the most powerful energies; and it would be killed by the stimulation emanating from these if it were not provided with a protective shield against stimuli” (Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” 27). Consequently, if this “protective shield” is shattered under the impact of an external stimulus, the psyche will experience this shattering as traumatic: “Trauma occurs,” in other words, “when the ego’s capacity for security is compromised, when the protective shield it erects against the outside world is penetrated” (Cheah 193). The ego’s psychic health will henceforth be compromised, and it will struggle to regain its equilibrium. In Freud’s words,

We describe as “traumatic” any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield. It seems to me that the concept of trauma necessarily implies a connection of this kind with a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli. Such an event as external trauma is bound to provoke a disturbance on a large scale in the functioning of the organism’s energy and set in motion every possible defensive measure. (“Beyond the Pleasure Principle” 29)

Given that, for Freud, the “essence of [a traumatic situation] is an experience of helplessness on the part of the ego in the face of an accumulation of excitation [. . .] which cannot be dealt with” (“Inhibitions” 81), the restoration of a viable ego-function—and that means a restoration of the protective shield: the immunization of the ego against external threats—is clearly crucial: this is the “defensive measure” of which Freud speaks and which usually takes the form of anxiety: an anxiety that finds

expression in repetition compulsion and that retrospectively attempts to “immunize” the ego against the shattering that has already taken place.

In fact, the shattering, and subsequent development of “traumatic neurosis,” is facilitated by the *absence* of anxiety: an anxious ego expects danger and is therefore prepared for it. By contrast, the absence of anxiety makes the ego vulnerable to being surprised, and overwhelmed, by a danger it did not foresee. Distinguishing “fright” from the related concepts of “anxiety” and “fear,” Freud emphasizes that it is the lack of preparation that is the deciding factor in whether an encounter with danger will or will not lead to the development of a “traumatic neurosis”:

“Anxiety” describes a particular state of expecting the danger or preparing for it, even though it may be an unknown one. “Fear” requires a definite object of which to be afraid. “Fright,” however, is the name we give to the state a person gets into when he has run into danger without being prepared for it; it emphasises the factor of surprise. I do not believe anxiety can produce a traumatic neurosis. There is something about anxiety that protects its subject against fright and so against fright-neuroses. (“Beyond the Pleasure Principle” 12-13)

Inasmuch as, in Freud’s words, “Anxiety ‘as a signal’ is the response of the ego to the threat of the occurrence of a traumatic situation” (“Inhibitions” 81), anxiety functions as a warning system to alert the ego to further potential attacks on the “protective shield.” In fact, Freud goes so far as to suggest that anxiety is not just any old defense, but constitutes “the last line of defence of the shield against stimuli”:

It will be seen, then, that preparedness for anxiety and the hypercathexis of the receptive systems constitute the last line of defence of the shield against stimuli. In the case of quite a number of traumas, the difference between systems that are unprepared and systems that are well prepared through being hypercathexed may be a decisive factor in determining the outcome; [. . .]. (“Beyond the Pleasure Principle” 31-32)

Being anxious means being prepared—and being prepared means that the ego is never caught off guard; anxiety, the constant revisitation of the scene of the original trauma in anticipation of further traumatizing impacts (such as in dreams, for example) thus immunizes the ego: “These dreams,” Freud says, “are endeavouring to master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis” (“Beyond the Pleasure Principle” 32). Siegfried and Florian Zepf therefore rightly comment that, “in their dreams, the victims attempt to assure themselves of the fitness of their ego functions that had failed in the traumatic situation” (343).

Postcolonial Anxiety

I want to translate these observations back into a cultural context and suggest that the somewhat allergic reaction to the “virus of deconstruction” we so frequently encounter in postcolonial conversations

can be read productively as precisely such an anxious defense response to the trauma of colonization: a response, that is, that endeavors “to master the trauma retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis.” The anxiety around deconstruction, in other words, functions, in this reading, as a belated attempt to immunize against the trauma of colonization—and not without good reason, for if deconstruction amounts to a “radical acceptance of vulnerability,” then deconstruction is of course the very thing that most *cannot* be accepted.

Following Freud, Ruth Leys suggests that the situation of traumatic helplessness is a result of “an excess of stimulation that by traumatically breaching the boundary between inside and outside shatters the unity and identity of the ego” (29). Extending Freud’s evocative metaphor into my present discussion, I want to suggest that colonization functioned as precisely such “an excess of stimulation” that breached the “protective shield” of a colonized people’s sense of self and overwhelmed “the interior” with external influences, thus shattering “the unity and identity” of this sense of self. The very call for a restoration of the self—the very call for identity politics—hence emerges as an anxious defense maneuver designed to shore up the “protective shield” and retrospectively prevent a traumatization that has already happened. In fact, the military register from which Freud draws his metaphor seems particularly apt in this context for, as John Caputo reminds us, the very term “community” around which an identity politics so frequently circles has a military background and relies on the rhetoric of fortifications and dividing walls:

[A] *communitas* is a military formation, referring to the common defense we build against the other, the fortifications built around the city: *munire*, to fortify ourselves, to build a wall, to gather ourselves together (*com*) for protection against the other, to encircle ourselves with a common wall or barrier that protects the same from the incoming (*invenire, invention*) of the other, that keeps the same safe from the other. (25)

Inasmuch as these walls around a community are built “for the protection against the other,” they can be read, I suggest, as an expression of Freudian anxiety in the wake of traumatization: an anxious attempt to re-establish the breached “boundary between inside and outside,” the “protective shield,” so as to pre-empt—and thus be able to prevent—further traumatization.

Defending Vulnerability

We seem to have come to a point where, despite an appearance of structural alliance, the two traumatized subjects under discussion here—the Levinasian ethical subject and the postcolonial subject—emerge as diametrically opposed. Both can be said to be “defending vulnerability,” but where Levinas would speak in defense *of* vulnerability, of trauma as that which enables ethical transcendence and which is ultimately, in

Visker's words, a "trauma which heals," the traumatized postcolonial subject defends *against* vulnerability, attempting to heal the affective onslaught that breached the "protective shield" by growing thicker skin.

In a slightly different but congenial register—speaking of his clinical work with traumatized patients—psychotherapist David Goodman notes in his recent monograph on Levinasian ethics and psychology that a traumatized person will respond to the traumatic shattering of the self not by welcoming this shattering as a "trauma which heals" but rather as something to be defended against for vital self-protection:

When Visker (2000) writes that [. . .] "the Other brings me a trauma which heals" (248), I cannot help but think about some of my therapy patients who are adult survivors of severe childhood abuse. The clamping down of the psyche into self-protecting and limbic-oriented states is a salient feature of nearly any trauma-related literature in psychology. (164)

Similarly, where Levinas speaks of a categorical "openness of self without a world" and a "not being walled in" (*Otherwise than Being* 182), Goodman cautions,

For many trauma survivors, the other *was* Hell and *remains* Hell. The other is utterly defended against [. . .]. Exteriority becomes, too frequently, a source of retraumatization or reactivation, rather than conversation, exposure, or a calling outside of oneself. Disequilibrium certainly takes place, but it is a being off balance that does not denude. Rather, it sends persons more fully into the inner chambers of their nucleus. It is a clamouring for nucleation in the experience of fragmentation. And, when this nucleus is constructed, the windows and doors are shut *and* deadbolted. (164)

Hence, where Levinas embraces the "gaping wound" as the affective openness of the self to the needs of the other, Goodman, much in the way Freud saw the anxious resurrection of the protective shield as the typical response to trauma, notes the opposite movement in the trauma he encounters in his clinical practice: instead of openness, he says, "Walls become fortified and shells thickened" (165). And it is this same movement towards a "fortified and well-boundaried self" (Goodman 171) that we see replicated, I suggest, in the case of identity politics. Does this mean, then, that, in spite of a superficial structural alliance, the two traumatized subjects under discussion here ultimately have little to say to each other? That, because one pulls towards openness and the other towards closure, there simply cannot be a "trauma which heals" in postcolonial contexts, and vulnerability can only ever be defended against rather than "radically accepted"?

To explore a possible answer to this question, I want to return once more to Freud and his proposal that anxiety is a defense response to trauma that attempts to recreate the shattered protective shield. Interestingly, as

Ruth Leys reminds us, for Freud, anxiety is an ambivalent defense that is “cure and cause” all at once: “Freud characterizes anxiety simultaneously as the ego’s guard against future shocks *and* as what plunges it into disarray owing to a breaching of the protective shield: anxiety is both *cure* and *cause* of psychic trauma” (28). To Derrideans, a defense that is simultaneously cure and cause will be easily recognizable as a *pharmakon* or, in Derrida’s later terminology, as an instance of autoimmunity.⁴ Utilizing this terminology, I want to propose that this anxious defense cannot, in the end, defend that which it is called upon to defend, so that, ultimately, a defense of vulnerability is always as much *in defense of* vulnerability as it is a defended vulnerability. There are perhaps two reasons for this: the first is to do with an inherent impossibility to create perfect closure and the second, with the life-giving properties that are to be associated with this impossibility.

From Immunity to Autoimmunity

The first reason is to do with a certain constitutional permeability we need to allow for in the Freudian “protective shield” that protects the organism or, in my more specific discussion, the postcolonial *autos*.⁵ To explain more fully what I have in mind here, allow me to play a little with the Freudian metaphors of the “protective shield” or “crust” and bring them into conversation with the Derridean concept of the parergon. To recall: the Freudian “crust” functions “as a special envelope or membrane resistant to stimuli” that keeps the organism shielded from exterior forces or, perhaps more precisely, buffers the impact of these external forces (“Beyond the Pleasure Principle” 27). As such, this membrane functions not just to protect the interior of the organism but also, implicitly, to demarcate and keep alive the distinction between interior and exterior.

In a parallel fashion—albeit in an admittedly different context—Immanuel Kant utilized such border thought in the *Critique of Judgement*. Briefly stated, Kant’s concern in the Third *Critique* was to analyse what is involved in making an aesthetic judgement. This analysis involves drawing a clear distinction between what is intrinsic or integral to an art work and what is merely extraneous to or not properly part of it, because “aesthetic judgements are to bear only on what is intrinsic to a work” (Taylor 273). What aids in making this distinction or what lends this distinction greater visibility, for Kant, is the parergon—a Greek term that means “by-work,” “adjunct,” or “added extra.” As an “added extra”—and we may want to think here of such things as the frame around a painting or, more pertinently in our context, the crust around the organism—the parergon is clearly a supplement: an element that is attached to but that remains always external to the ergon: the artwork itself. Its function is to

delineate a work of art and demarcate its boundaries against a background: in other words, the function of the parergon is to distinguish more clearly between the inside and the outside of the artwork.

Kant's analysis has received an influential re-reading by Derrida in an essay called "Parergon." If the attraction of the parergon for Kant was the promise that it would create a clear distinction between inside (ergon) and outside (pargeon) and thus delimit the proper space for aesthetic judgements, Derrida's parergon functions to call this clear distinction into question. Derrida calls the dependence of the analytic of the beautiful on parergonality an "infectious affection" (*Truth in Painting* 73). The impact of this "infectious affection" of the outside on the inside is one Dorothea Olkowski refers to as "parasitism":

Derrida's tale is about what happens when a system of art is "parasitized" and thus is opened up to what's outside it. [...] The tale Derrida tells is about what happens when parasitism allows a system's own outside to enter it in such a way that it divides the system at its edges. (217)

In other words, what Derrida sees in this "infectious affection" is an encounter with what lies outside the parergon. Such an encounter with what lies beyond displaces the unquestioned self-presence of the artwork or, more pertinently in our context, of Freud's single-celled organism.

What this means, then, is that the "protective shield" that is designed to protect the interior of the organism from the exterior can never create perfect immunity. Immunity inevitably turns into autoimmunity because the "crust," toughened or "baked through" though it may be, can never be perfectly impermeable. For J. Hillis Miller, who makes a similar argument in relation to indigenous contexts, this constitutional permeability means that any identity—any ego at home with itself—is always haunted by its other, an other that is lurking just beyond the ego's protective confines: "The imagination of being at home, in a homeland or 'Heimat,' instantly raises the fearful ghost of the 'unheimlich,' the uncanny, the terrorist at the door, threshold, or frontier" (40-41). The protective barrier around any *autos* is thus always susceptible to the "terror of invasion" and therefore simultaneously conjures up those *beyond*, those "fearful ghost[s] of the 'unheimlich'" on the other side of the barrier, who threaten the safety of those at home (*heimlich*). In Michael Naas's words,

Autoimmunity thus begins [...] with the first specter's haunting of the self, that is to say, from the very beginning. "'I am' would mean 'I am haunted'" (*SM*, 133), writes Derrida in *Specters of Marx*. Our being is ontologically, hauntologically, says Derrida, autoimmune. (23)

From Autoimmunity to Life

I want to suggest that, despite this originary haunting—and this means despite the obvious threat that may lurk on the other side of the "protective shield" around the *autos*—this "failure" of immunity is

ultimately an enabling condition insofar as it constitutes what Derrida calls a “threshold that *opens* the at-home” (*Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* 26, emphasis added); in other words, it returns us to the Levinasian openness that previously seemed incompatible with traumatized colonial subjectivity. Levinas notes that “The possibility for the home to open to the Other is as essential to the essence of the home as closed doors and windows” (*Totality and Infinity* 173). This constitutional openness has several implications. For one, it turns the defensive walls around a home—the *autos* at the heart of assumptions of autonomy or sovereignty—into an ethical site of hospitality. Further, and more pertinently in the context of this present discussion, this opening—provided by autoimmunity—is ultimately what keeps the living organism alive; in other words, the very *breach in defense* that is autoimmunity is ultimately what defends the living organism.

If, in the preceding section, we saw that the defensive desire for immunity always and inevitably leads to autoimmunity, let me now, in concluding, offer some brief thoughts on how the reverse also applies. In other words, I want to suggest that autoimmunity also leads to “immunity,” or at least to a certain kind of immunity: the kind of immunity that allows the self to remain on the side of life, that is to say, on the side of the future. What remaining on the side of life involves is a rethinking of the temporality of trauma. For Freud, as we have seen, trauma is usually associated with a wound sustained in the past, the resonances of which color the experience in (and of) the present and compel us compulsively to repeat the past in the present. Derrida, by contrast, invites us to “complicate this schema” and “rethink the temporalization of a traumatism” (Borradori 96). Asking, “What is a traumatic event,” he suggests that “It is the future that determines the unappropriability of the event, not the present or the past.” He elaborates,

We are talking about a trauma, and thus an event, whose temporality proceeds neither from the now that is present nor from the present that is past but from an im-presentable to come (*à venir*). A weapon wounds and leaves forever open an unconscious scar; but this weapon is terrifying because it comes from the to-come, from the future, a future so radically to come that it resists even the grammar of the future anterior. [. . .] Traumatism is produced by the *future*, by the *to come*, by the threat of the worst *to come*, rather than by an aggression that is “over and done with.” (Borradori 97)

Despite the clear terror that such a temporalization of trauma harbors—precisely because it points to the ultimate impossibility of defense against trauma—I want to suggest that this different temporalization of trauma is life-affirming rather than life-denying because it allows for an open future: a future that is not anxiously—transferentially—construed as yet another version, yet another instantiation, of the past. As I shall argue, what Michael Naas calls “autoimmune vulnerability” is infinitely preferable

to the defensive investment in anxiety as immunization against future threats (21): although “autoimmune vulnerability” necessarily *risks* being frightened and traumatized by an external threat it cannot foresee, the anxious defense of a projective anticipation of future threats effectively amounts to a canceling out of temporality and therefore results in living death.

It is this kind of living death that Wendy Brown associates with the defensive stance on display in identity politics, where the very effort to heal the “gaping wound” at the heart of identity ultimately, in “enacting an over-active, over the top defence of itself,” as Andrews had put it so poignantly in her discussion of the misfiring immune response with the onset of an autoimmune disease, “shoots itself in the foot.” Discussing what she calls identity politics’ “wounded attachment” to a history of suffering, Brown suggests that the anxious “desire for recognition” is the product of “*ressentiment*, the moralizing revenge of the powerless” (400), and seems “as often to breed a politics of recrimination and rancor, of culturally dispersed paralysis and suffering, a tendency to reproach power rather than aspire to it, to disdain freedom rather than practice it” (390). The consequences of identity politics’ anxious investment in the *autos*—or, more specifically, in the shoring up of a “protective shield” to keep the *autos* safe—are therefore dire:

But in its attempt to displace its suffering, identity structured by resentment at the same time becomes invested in its own subjection. [. . .] Thus politicized identity that presents itself as a self-affirmation now appears as the opposite, as predicated on and requiring its sustained rejection by a “hostile external world.” [. . .] identity structured by this ethos becomes deeply invested in its own impotence. (Brown 403)

What identity politics ultimately results in is what Brown calls “the loss of futurity”: “Politicized identity thus enunciates itself, makes claims for itself, only by entrenching, dramatizing, and inscribing its pain in politics and can hold out no future—for itself or others—that triumphs over this pain” (406). The Freudian defense of anxiety—that is, the defensive attempt, in the wake of trauma, to pre-empt and prevent future traumatization by retrospectively “immunizing” against what has already happened—thus paradoxically leads to an endless reliving of the trauma, for “[t]rauma develops,” as Marguerite La Caze, drawing on Freud, has recently argued in an essay on “Terrorism and Trauma,” “when the individual is not able to respond to the traumatic events in the usual way by freeing herself or himself from the emotional pain she or he is suffering” (615). By remaining anxiously attached to the experience of trauma, that is, by being perpetually, defensively, on the alert for signals that the danger is about to return, the self becomes unable to free itself from the experience of trauma and its injurious pain. The defense of anxiety, designed

to “immunize” the self against future threats, thus perversely immunizes the self against the future itself. Holding it prisoner to the experience of trauma, anxiety produces an endless perpetuation of the past. It construes the future in terms of the past: a future that appears to be already known and, as Alice Andrews reminds us, such “[a]n objectified future affects a fearful petrification” (197). A future without futurity, that is, amounts to a living death.

This then leads us, on a final note, back to autoimmunity as an altogether different kind of defense: a “defense” founded on vulnerability. For where the immunizing defense of anxiety, in seeking to make the future controllable by making it knowable, effectively ends up canceling out the future, vulnerability, or more specifically the vulnerability of autoimmunity, conversely “inscribes the promise of the future” (Rottenberg 11). Elizabeth Rottenberg argues that the “implacable law of autoimmunity must be reaffirmed, therefore, if a discourse is not to be mortiferous (*mortifère*), if it is to bear death in life, if it is to remain on the side of the ‘yes,’ of the affirmation of life, of the future” (10). If perhaps still not quite a “trauma which heals,” “autoimmune vulnerability” at the very least prevents a premature death. Although “autoimmune vulnerability” necessarily *risks* being traumatized by an external threat it cannot foresee, it avoids the anxious defense of a projective anticipation of future threats: an anticipation that effectively amounts to a canceling out of temporality.

What I am proposing here, then, is that the anxious immunization we witness within the field of postcolonial studies against what Derek Attridge calls “the virus of deconstruction” is not only a belated (*nachträglich*) attempt to master a trauma that has already occurred—it is part of the repetition compulsion, as it were—but it is also a defense maneuver that is ultimately mortiferous. Fearfully on the lookout for anything that can be construed as resembling the original traumatizing force from the outside, and that may bring a further attack on the “protective shield” of an already embattled *autos*, postcolonial studies seeks to defend against a trauma that has already happened and, in the name of survival, paradoxically immunizes against that which enables this survival. In fact, Derrida goes so far as to say that survival of the *autos*, of community, is predicated upon the logic of autoimmunity:

Community as *com-mon auto-immunity*: no community [is possible] that would not cultivate its own auto-immunity, a principle of sacrificial self-destruction ruining the principle of self-protection (that of maintaining its self-integrity intact), and this in view of some sort of invisible and spectral survival. This self-contesting attestation keeps the auto-immune community alive, which is to say, open to something other and more than itself: the other, the future, death, freedom, the coming or the love of the other, the space and time of a spectralizing messianicity beyond all messianism. (*Act of Religion* 87)

The very fact that autoimmunity is necessary for life—that, in Michael Naas’s words, “the graft of autoimmunity ‘breathes new life’” into a living organism (29)—means that we cannot *not* live with the inevitable risks such an autoimmune life necessarily harbors: “Without certain forces of autoimmunity,” he suggests, “we would reject organs and others essential to ‘our’ survival—whether we are talking about an individual body, a community, or a nation-state” (25). Autoimmunity, our constitutional vulnerability and openness to the other, is thus vital for survival. This, then, is what Rottenberg calls our “terrible predicament,” a predicament that compels us to risk life so that we may live:

By opening us to time, to what arrives or happens, to the future, the autoimmunitary—our heritage—also exposes us to the worst, to what, as Derrida says, “might or perhaps will take place, which will be *worse than anything that has ever taken place*” (97).

To recognize the terrifying effect of the autoimmunitary process that is inevitably and irreducibly at work in what we call “life” is not, however, to give in to an “essentially tragic philosophy” (as Terry Eagleton once characterized Paul de Man’s thought [200]). On the contrary, it is to offer a bold thematization of a terrible predicament, a predicament in which the failure of self-protection, the failure of consciousness and cognition to protect against the “possibility to come of the worst” (“Autoimmunity” 97), is bound up with the future of life. (12)

It is precisely because it is not the success but the failure of self-protection that is “bound up with the future of life” that I believe “the virus of deconstruction” is ultimately not the scary neo-imperial monster (to be defended against and kept out at all cost) that it is so frequently made out to be in postcolonial studies. Quite the opposite: the possibility of *auto*-immunity is as essential to the survival of the *autos* as is its *auto*-nomy, and if deconstruction, as Spivak suggests, indeed amounts to a “radical acceptance of vulnerability,” then it is to be welcomed for the promise of life that it brings. Threaten the *autos* hiding behind its “protective shield” it may well do, but then, and this is the aporetic logic at work here, this exposure to threat—this constitutional vulnerability—is as much part of the living *autos* as is its bounded protection.

University of Otago

Notes

1. One may object here that the use of the biomedical metaphor of autoimmunity in a sociopolitical context cannot but produce a skewed discussion. However, although caution in the cross-disciplinary conversation is undoubtedly called for, it should not be forgotten that, as W. J. T. Mitchell reminds us, “the very notion of immunity as such is originally based in a sociopolitical discourse, not a biological one.” In fact, he considers it a “bipolar image”: “The whole theory of the immune system and the discipline of immunology is riddled with images drawn from the sociopolitical sphere—of invaders and defenders, hosts and parasites, natives and aliens, and of borders and identities that must be maintained. In asking us to see terror as autoimmunity, then, Derrida is bring-

ing the metaphor home at the same time he sends it abroad, stretching it to the limits of the world. The effect of the bipolar image, then, is to produce a situation in which there is *no literal meaning*, nothing but the resonances between two images, one biomedical, the other political" (282).

2. What must also be noted here is that, in Derrida's use of the term, as Andrews reminds us, autoimmunity "acts as a deconstructive supplement to the function of the biological process it appropriates." Thus, while Derrida uses the metaphor "to explain the inevitable self-opening of a 'body' to the other who comes," biological autoimmunity functions differently. Here, Andrews points out, "the immune system does not necessarily attack itself, that is it does not limit or attack the body's mechanisms of defence, its antibodies and lymphocytes, for example, but rather it attacks *any* tissue in the body, whether healthy or not. Autoimmune *disease* is then an excessively defensive response as an *over-protective closure of the body*." In biological autoimmunity it is hence the moment of treatment that enacts the deconstructive gesture that Derrida attributes to the autoimmune process itself: "In the biomedical narrative it is in the supplementary moment of the decision to treat that this autoimmune closure is opened up to the other in a deconstructive vein" (Andrews 190).
3. A further evocative example of this split—in this case even inscribing trauma linguistically into identity—emerges in the geographical space from which I write this. In Aotearoa/New Zealand (with the slash here speaking of yet another kind of split), Maori, the indigenous inhabitants of this place, call themselves *tangata whenua*: people of the land. Thus declaring their intimate attachment to place—the place of their birth and belonging—they make this attachment integral to their identity. This integral attachment was shattered by colonization, however: by appropriating large sections of native land, settlers quite literally separated *tangata* from *whenua*, the people from the land, and thereby produced a traumatic split—an open wound—at the heart of this identity.
4. Derrida explicitly aligns the two concepts when he says that "The *pharmakon* is another name, an old name, for this autoimmunity logic (Borradori 124).
5. Freud says that "*Protection against stimuli* is an almost more important function for the living organism than *reception of stimuli*," thus making it clear that, even though his main concern is with defence and protection against rather than reception of stimuli, it would be a mistake to assume that reception of stimuli was not also vital for the organism's survival.

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