

# Demystifying trauma in international relations theory: From incomprehensibility to the liberatory *real*

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## Abstract

Recent work on trauma and memory in international relations has sought to emphasize the key role trauma plays in state and community formation, security policies, the mediatization of atrocities, and transitional and social justice. This article problematizes the doxology of trauma in this body of work: the assumptions about the traumatic that go without saying because they come without saying in the discipline. We counter, in particular, international relations' unreflective consumption of Cathy Caruth's paradigm of trauma as an incomprehensible shock. In this article, we excavate the contours, origins, and effects of this doxology. We first use the examples of post-conflict struggles for truth and reconciliation and the COVID-19 pandemic to illustrate that international relations' vision of trauma centralizes a psychiatric and medicalized paradigm of governance and management that depoliticizes suffering. We then seek to provide an alternative account of trauma woven in dialogue with the psychoanalytical reflections of Francophone and Lusophone scholars in the Black Radical Tradition, particularly Fanon, Mbembe, Kilomba, Nascimento and Gonzalez. The goal is to move from a theory of trauma-as-event to an understanding of (colonial/racial) trauma as it appears in the writings of those who never felt protected or at peace in the white colonial order.

## Keywords

Memory, postcolonialism, psychoanalysis, racism, trauma, violence

## Introduction

International relations (IR) scholars have become increasingly concerned with the ways different stakeholders seek to mobilize traumatic events, making the intersection between trauma and memory the object of 'intense contestation' in international politics (Resende and Budryte, 2014: 10). Yet while such work emphasizes that historical traumas are contested in international politics, the

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concept of trauma itself remains far less contested in international theory. Described as an ‘inchoate’ literature (Lerner, 2019: 550), trauma studies in global politics shows a remarkable degree of cohesion in its conceptualizations of trauma and the traumatic. Specifically, trauma as it is invoked in the discipline centralizes the concept as it has been understood by influential literary philosopher Cathy Caruth, with two key components: the event as source of trauma, and the traumatic as incomprehensible.

Our project takes these components as a starting point and builds on our discomfort with the ways that the IR discipline has somewhat unproblematically adopted this particular conceptualization of trauma. Drawing on previous work by one of us on trauma theory and anxiety and the other’s scholarship in a post-atrocity context, we suggest that the conceptualization of trauma in IR—as a quality of events which expose the incomprehensible side of (in)humanity—hinders the discipline’s capacity to comprehend the political and transformative aspects of the aftermath of the event. Additionally, this conceptualization of trauma centralizes a psychiatric understanding that invites a discourse of medicalization of trauma, which has important depoliticizing effects.

To engage these arguments, we frame this piece around three questions which map onto the sections of the article. First, how has the discipline of IR used trauma conceptually? To respond, the first section traces the evolution of the Caruthian concept of trauma-as-incomprehensible and the ways it has been incorporated into IR.

Second, what potential problems arise from this framing of trauma in IR and what are the political stakes of its usage? The second section focuses on the politics of claims that trauma is unrepresentable through an exploration of two specific examples where trauma discourse is invoked, including the classic example of the post-conflict context and the contemporary COVID-19 case, laying out the effects of framing trauma as a crisis in need of management and governance.

Third, what alternative methods of imagining may exist and how can we engage the somewhat more complicated theoretical ancestors or anti-colonial/anti-racist imaginings of trauma? The last two sections demonstrate that Freudian and Lacanian reflections on trauma are a bit more complicated and nuanced than the way they have been adopted or presented in the IR discipline, and, avoiding the somewhat easy classification of trauma as a decidedly Eurocentric/Western concept, we invite an engagement with the psychoanalytic reflections of scholars in the Black Radical Tradition, such as Fanon, Nascimento, Gonzalez, Mbembe, and Kilomba.

The article aims to think through both the political and theoretical elements of our discomfort in relation to trauma theory. The idea of incomprehensibility—that trauma emerges beyond our comprehension—appears neat in the way it is often adopted, yet it is worthwhile complicating this idea and considering how incomprehensibility normalizes conservative tropes in contemporary politics. We believe that IR scholars can find, in the radical ways they envision the theme of racial/colonial trauma, a means to further problematize the psychiatric, event-based approach, and consider alternative methods of imagining *real* life beyond the conservative visions of life as nasty, brutish, short and, we would add, traumatic.

## Unbearable/unspeakable violence: Trauma in global politics

The term trauma originates from the Greek *τραύμα* meaning wound (Luckhurst, 2008). Historically, most explorations of trauma were restricted to the medical field, imported to the nascent sciences of the mind in the 19th century (Fassin and Rechtman, 2007; Lerner, 2022; Leys, 2000; Young, 1995). As Young (1995) provocatively notes, pre-19th-century texts do not use the language of trauma because the concept itself did not exist. Some, such as Whitehead, claim that trauma is ‘a historical and cultural product’ (2008: 13) drawn from a very specific Western tradition. References to the concept of trauma reached a height in both the medical and social sciences in the late 1980s

and 1990s, when more than 10,000 academic articles were published on the subject (Bedard et al., 2004).

What we call the doxology of trauma in IR can be primarily traced back to the work of Cathy Caruth (1995, 1996, 2013), responsible for disseminating contemporary versions of the concept in the field of cultural criticism and the humanities. Caruth explains that trauma is associated with an ‘overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena’ (Caruth, 1996: 11). Conveniently, for IR scholars, her first example of trauma is the experience of a soldier ‘faced with sudden and massive death around him . . . who suffers this sight in a numbed state, only to relive it later on in repeated nightmares’ (Caruth, 1996: 11).

This central example, which recurs in Caruth’s oeuvre, is paradigmatic of the three essential features that trauma acquires in her theory: *external shock*, *unintelligibility*, and *belatedness*. During and after a traumatic event—such as the firsthand experience of war—traditional schemas of representation (life lived in peaceful times) are ruptured and fractured. The Caruthian soldier, excised from normal life and forced into the horrors of the front, cannot truly experience war (acquire awareness as it happens). This soldier, who remains numbed during his deployment, paradoxically will only experience war in its aftermath, in the traumatic flashbacks of the violence he ‘failed’ to witness. These repetitions of the front are not memories per se (representations of past experiences articulated in the mind), but *literal reproductions of the horror* that evaded him at first sight. Caruth uses the suffering veteran to argue that history is no longer referential—concerned with the representation of the past as it happened—and suggests events are filtered through trauma, only becoming available indirectly (Caruth, 1995).

The Caruthian paradigm found its way into the IR discipline through the pathbreaking work of Jenny Edkins and as part of the expansion of critical security studies (CSS) in the wake of 11 September, 2001. For Edkins, traumatic events, such as the Holocaust and 9/11, are important to IR because they evidence the violence underpinning the relationship between sovereignty and subjectivity. Following Caruth, Edkins understands trauma as ‘the response to a shock encounter with brutality and/or death’ (Edkins, 2006: 107). She views traumatic events as indeterminate, noting that ‘what happens’ during such event ‘just does not make sense’; traumatic events belong to a category of ‘events that resist meaning’ (Edkins, 2003: 37).

Out of Edkins’ work, CSS scholars took up the concept of trauma, mainly within a social constructivist framework, situated largely in two turns: the memorial turn and the affective/emotional turn. In this body of work on trauma in IR, several themes emerge, but the idea of an *external violent shock/rupture* has remained central. Just as Caruth notes that the traumatic event cannot be placed within frameworks of prior knowledge, and Edkins emphasizes the disruption of linear time associated with ‘trauma time,’ others also identify the shocking and disruptive effects of a traumatic event. Prager notes that trauma manifests as an individual living in the present as if it were the past (2008: 409; see also Fierke, 2006: 124). Trigg (2009) has suggested that trauma overwhelms the relation between place, time, and embodiment. Edkins (2006: 110) concurs, noting that it is the obliteration of distinction associated with trauma that is horrific to us. Hutchison and Bleiker (2008: 386) note that traumatic events ‘disrupt continuity’ and that trauma is an encounter with an event ‘so shocking that our understanding of how the world works is severely disrupted’ (2008: 287). Even works that allegedly move beyond the focus on the event, such as Lerner’s notion of collective trauma as a multilevel breakdown of representation or Fierke and Mackay’s quantum theory, cannot part with the causal primacy of a violent rupture in the etiology of the traumatic. In the end, trauma remains ‘the result of initial violent disjunctures’ (Lerner, 2022: 11) or ‘an entanglement with the past’ (Fierke and Mackay, 2020: 451).

Importantly, in IR, trauma is seen as particularly disruptive of centralized, sovereign political authority because it invokes the betrayal of trust in a political community (Edkins, 2006: 107). There is a marked focus on events that ‘shattered people’s trust in humanity’ and require significant restorative efforts (Ionescu and Margaroni, 2020: ix). Trauma ‘shatters our sense of belonging’ (Hutchison and Bleiker, 2008: 388), and is at its heart a loss of personhood, thus putting the very politics of community into question. Akbari-Dibavar (2016: 125) notes, ‘trauma disturbs the ordinary and breaks the shields that were there to preserve our sense of security and continuity.’ This opens space for an investigation of the working of the sovereign state in reimposing a sense of normalcy and applying the language of exceptionality (Edkins, 2003, 2006). Edkins (2006: 99) suggests that the violence of the traumatic event betrays relationality and radical interconnectedness, which can be reconstituted through memory. Bell (2006: 10) emphasizes how states often seek to manage the ensuing disruption by forging a linear narrative of the event through the mechanisms of memorialization and commemoration.

Another theme that emerges in IR’s adoption of trauma is the narrative of the incomprehensible that places the traumatic event beyond the reach of representational practices. IR scholars adopt by default Caruth’s notion (1995) that, as in the example of the suffering soldier, trauma is something that escapes the very possibility of experience. This places trauma as an external event, often framed as a priori to language or other systems of meaning. Hutchison and Bleiker (2008: 388) write that ‘words can’t adequately convey physical and emotional sensations experienced.’ Fierke suggests that the traumatic ‘lies outside linguistic representations’ (Fierke, 2006: 120). Pace and Bilgic (2018: 505) note that ‘speechlessness’ is a common expression in the context of a traumatic event. Akbari-Dibavar (2016: 126) suggests that ‘[t]here is no language to talk about trauma.’ Likewise, LaCapra has suggested that there are certain types of event whose traumatic nature is ‘disorienting’ (1998: 72), ‘blocks understanding’ and ‘disrupts memory’ (1998: 1).

At the heart of this problematique is a tension governing whether trauma can or should be represented, its ‘essential incomprehensibility’ and ‘ineffability,’ a debate first emergent in a post-Holocaust era of memory and memorialization (Douglass and Vogler, 2003; Waxman, 2008). Survivor Primo Levi notes that in Auschwitz, the prisoners lacked the words to express *an event that defies representation* (Douglass and Vogler, 2003: 31), what Waxman has called traumatic memory’s ‘affront to understanding’ (Waxman, 2008). Steiner frames it in similar terms: ‘the world of Auschwitz exists outside of words and reason’ (Steiner, 1990: 166). There is a tension between the obligation to bear witness and the ethical concern that the Holocaust should not be banalized by inadequate representations (Gray and Oliver, 2004). For psychoanalyst and survivor Dori Laub, the Holocaust is an unprecedented historical crisis posed by *an event without witnesses* (Felman and Laub 1992: xvii). For Felman and Laub (1992), survivors’ difficulty in telling their own stories and finding an audience who can relate are evidence of the ‘inherently incomprehensible and deceptive psychological structure of the event’ which ‘precluded its own witnessing, even by its very victims’ (1992: 80). This is premised on the notion that the Holocaust is inassimilable to historicist or contextual readings (Baer, 2005: 66–67) and that the traumatic event itself corrupts the means of representing it (Baer, 2005: 20). Indeed, ‘trauma is supposed to be unrepresentable’ (Mitchell, 2010: 60).

This assumption of trauma as fracturing representation has become a particular doxology, or a belief-building process; it acquired the sense of something that ‘goes without saying’ (Bourdieu, 1977 : 167) insofar as unrepresentability of the traumatic is ‘no longer at issue since it has itself become part of official strategies’ (Huysen, 2000: 39). Monk (2018) has further clarified that doxa are the commonplace and uncontested associations and assumptions that structure our encounters with particular ideas. That is, there is a political move from the unrepresentability of trauma to the invocation of trauma as the ultimate unnamable, unrepresentable Thing, language used by LaCapra

(1997: 246). This has had important political consequences, best illustrated by the regulation of obscene images (Auchter, 2021), the evolution of trigger warnings (Auchter, 2016), and debates ongoing in the genres of war and humanitarian photography (Baer, 2005; Kennedy, 2016).

In sum, the idea of trauma as an external shock that poses an unrepresentable or incomprehensible rupture to sociopolitical reality has become embedded in the IR discipline as a powerful doxology which remains unquestioned. The next section examines the political effects of such taken-for-grantedness in relation to two examples: the relationship between trauma and accountability after violence, and representations of the COVID-19 pandemic as traumatic.

## **The management of the traumatic: Discourses of trauma and security governance**

This section articulates some of the problems inherent in taking for granted the equation of trauma with incomprehensibility by highlighting the effects of this move through two examples. The discussion of the aftermath of mass violence allows us to demonstrate the ways trauma is depicted as a problem for governance, one which marginalizes survivors in political processes, favors external expertise, and frames as necessary a medicalized discourse that treats trauma as a disease in need of management, ultimately a discourse that treats trauma as a kind of insecurity, often using the language of internal threat or internal instability. It is also an important example because this context is the one in which the language of trauma is invoked the most frequently within IR. The COVID-19 example allows us to highlight the trauma discourse's invocation of the framing of exceptionality within the language of crisis and incomprehensibility, which can elide the dynamics of everyday structural forms of violence. In other words, each example sheds light on the diverse set of effects that emerges from the invocation of trauma-as-incomprehensibility.

Specifically, we argue in this section, following the work of Howell (2011), that framings of psychiatry are interwoven with the politics of security governance and with understandings of order. We extend her work to illustrate how the Caruthian notion of trauma revitalizes the medicalized rhetoric of trauma, thereby invoking particular discourses of security governance. In other words, the particular model of trauma-as-incomprehensible sustains a notion of trauma as outside politics but also as a crisis in need of management.

Much of the focus on trauma in IR and security studies draws on international conflict, mass violence, and its aftermath. As the international community seeks to properly account for the traumatic event, there often emerges an issue of translation: the inability of the witness to describe it, and the difficulty of comprehension of the outsider, attributed to the representation gap articulated in the previous section. Akbari-Dibavar (2016: 127) has noted that survivors speaking out can disrupt romantic notions of trauma and impose responsibility on the audience. Survivors become displaced from their own representation because such representation is deemed structurally impossible by virtue of the traumatic event. As one of us has noted (Auchter, 2014), in Rwanda after the genocide, trauma became subsumed in a rhetoric of medicalization, where survivors were taken to medical tents when they expressed their trauma at national commemoration ceremonies, because it was deemed to be interfering with the process of reconciliation. Howell (2011) has also highlighted the ways trauma due to exposure to conflict has been considered by the international community as a risk factor of future conflict, framing survivors as a potential threat of disorder in need of intervention, as well as rendering traumatized populations too unstable to be worthy of development funding or investment in the eyes of the international community.

While there are some institutions of post-conflict reconciliation that centralize survivors' voices more than others, the larger understandings that underpin how these mechanisms frame trauma are fairly homogeneous. The goal of international frameworks is often to move beyond trauma through institutional management: identification of remains through forensic practices, psychosocial management of trauma, and resolution of a single narrative of the event through memorialization. Yet forensic anthropologists have found that often survivors prefer attention to witness accounts over forensic investigations (Elgerud and Kim, 2021; Kim and Hepner, 2019). Witness accounts, however, may be deemed unreliable due to the trauma of the witnesses, and their emotional responses may be considered unworthy of guiding the politics of reconciliation after conflict. The default is to turn to external actors who rely on purportedly scientific mechanisms such as forensics, which are seen as objective and unemotional. At times excavations are forced on survivor communities even when they may not want them, without appropriate cultural sensitization procedures and contrary to cultural or community norms (Kim et al., 2020). The universalization of trauma has generated a 'professionalised trauma discourse' that has assumed the West as the center of expertise, and exported a one-size-fits-all solution to non-Western contexts, ignoring 'local concepts of suffering, misfortune, and illness and eliding those discourses of loss and bereavement that may fulfill the role for the local community that in Western culture is provided by the trauma discourse' (Whitehead, 2008: 14).

Another mechanism is the governmental management of mental health, what Pupavac and Pupavac (2012) have described as the 'therapeutic state' in the Croatian context, where the state understands trauma as a medical problem in need of proper symptom management; post-conflict resolution mechanisms more generally have begun to incorporate mental health elements (Meierhenrich, 2007). Howell has described therapeutic interventions as situated in a rhetoric of rendering trauma intelligible within medical frameworks (Howell, 2011: 8), seeking to solve the problem of incomprehensibility, but which also reinforce pre-existing, and largely Western, notions of how to manage the traumatic event. This is exemplary of how a certain type of trauma discourse has been elevated to understand 'incomprehensible' extreme violence. This centers the traumatic event in a way that can be managed both psychiatrically and politically.

Summerfield (2001) has described how the concept of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) emerged not out of a medical context, but a political one, where returning Vietnam veterans sought to represent themselves 'not as perpetrators or offenders but as people traumatized by roles thrust on them by the US military' (Summerfield, 2001: 95, see also Fassin and Rechtman, 2007; Young, 1995). He notes that PTSD allowed them to claim the moral high ground and lent legitimacy to their victimhood within a medical discourse rather than an overtly political one—a depoliticizing shift similar to how we see the concept of trauma wielded in modern global politics. As Howell has noted in the context of a post-Iraq and Afghanistan world, soldiers and veterans themselves are increasingly medicalizing the trauma of war, and framing PTSD not as a mental disorder, but as an injury (Howell, 2011: 6–7). This framing is important because it centralizes a moment of injury: the traumatic event, drawing parallels with the moment of physical injury associated with war injuries such as limb loss.

As we have repeatedly noted, the Caruthian model centers trauma in the event, which can have the immediate effect of marginalizing survivors of mass atrocity and rendering their trauma a problem to be managed by the state or other forms of governance, as noted above. Yet in the contemporary political imaginary, we may be seeing more of the structural unrepresentability of trauma on the level of the everyday: the traumatic event is now everywhere. As Leys (2000) notes, the Caruthian paradigm leads to a dilution of the concept of trauma and associated claims of victimhood to the point that 'the traumatic' becomes virtually applicable to any form of experience and capable of explaining any form of violent event. This dynamic is quite effectively demonstrated by



framings of the COVID-19 pandemic. The language of trauma proliferates in discussions of the pandemic, framed as ‘an emotional response to a terrible event’ that ‘results in feelings of significant fear or helplessness’ (Lonsdorf, 2022). While this trauma was an individual one stemming from the pervasiveness of the threat of illness/death, isolation, and disruption to normal routines, it was also a social trauma experienced by collectives and framed by governments and communities in particular ways.

Expectedly, Caruth was amongst the many intellectuals who resorted to the language of trauma to render the pandemic intelligible. Caruth stated that essential workers such as ‘healthcare workers are very much like Vietnam vets’ (Caruth, 2022: 19:05) and that what made the pandemic traumatic was not only the proximity to mass death and suffering but ‘the inability or refusal of others to see it’ (Caruth, 2022: 27:58). Building on the example of interactions between terminal patients and their grieving relatives over the phone, she proclaimed that ‘seeing and ordinary speaking have become impossible’ (Caruth, 2022: 45:14) and that the traumatic rests in this ‘absolute communicative gap’ (Caruth, 2022: 45:18) between the dead and the living. In this model, because COVID-19 was framed as the ultimate traumatic crisis, it also invoked the correlate of trauma: incomprehensibility. Thus, this example is not only useful because it was explicitly taken up by Caruth, but because discourse about the pandemic draws heavily on the language of trauma, crisis, and incomprehensibility that are hallmarks of the Caruthian model of trauma we examine here. In political discourse, media coverage, and quotidian life, COVID-19 was depicted as fundamentally unknowable, and thus frightening/traumatic in its inability to be properly understood within existing frameworks (Kinnvall and Svensson, 2023).

Invoking trauma here involves a set of political moves: first, COVID-19 is likened to the trauma of warfare against an enemy agent, drawing on a rhetoric of the exceptional that allows political communities to subsume it within narratives of patriotism, not unlike the immediate post-9/11 context. We cannot understand the threat, and there is a trauma of such incomprehensibility. Incidentally, this also opened the door for partisan politics over threat definition itself.

Second, these narratives of patriotism bleed into nationalistic narratives that draw on war framing as a means to engage policies such as secure borders. This discourse of crisis trades in military imagery of a war against the COVID-19 virus in order to sustain a particular politics which underlies the recentralization of the neoliberal state apparatus. The need to do one’s duty for the nation is centralized on essential workers, who are key to keeping the economy and society going, yet who are also considered the most disposable due to the willingness of the neoliberal framing to place them at risk.

Third, as the crisis continues, the threat becomes steadily subsumed into the normal, as the vaccine emerges as a technique of crisis management. For example, after the vaccine rollout, journalist Mike Hills asks: ‘is the US on track to get back to some form of normality in 2021?’ (Hills, 2021), quoting an epidemiologist who suggests that what we will really see is the ‘emergence of a new normal,’ a common theme in news coverage post-vaccine rollout. Yet, this emphasis on returning to normal elides the collective suffering that structures everyday life. The invocation of trauma as incomprehensible obscures the burden that the everyday imposes on those lives who tend to be rendered disposable in what Mbembe (cited in Furtado, 2022) has called the system of necroliberalism.

In the framing of trauma-as-incomprehensible, crises are explained as exceptional events, but the dual regime of servitude/disposability exposed by them is far from abnormal. Indeed, the burden of the COVID-19 pandemic was shouldered disproportionately by the low-wage (essential) workers, racialized bodies in the Global North and South, vulnerable individuals and the elderly, who were not significant economic contributors. They felt as if their lives were deemed to have no value. As one immunocompromised individual noted: ‘I’m expensive and expendable. So, you

know, the sooner people like me disappear, the easier it will be for everybody' (Hughes, 2022). Her comment highlights how the underlying logic of risk management during the pandemic builds on the art of statecraft during so-called 'normal' circumstances, of whom the state can or cannot afford to protect. By attributing this logic to an exceptional set of circumstances under the label of trauma, scholars elide how this social attribution of disposability is a fundamental part of what we call normality.

One lesson highlights the limits of the exceptionalist narrative: the designation of essential workers. Essential workers were not rendered disposable in the same way as vulnerable individuals. They were not forced to face a greater risk of infection and potentially death (Zevnik, 2023) because of what bio-necro-political approaches have termed bare life. Rather, they ended up over-represented in preventable deaths precisely because they were essential. In this sense, the narrative often circulated, especially before the vaccine rollout, that if only essential personnel mattered, we would see different COVID-19 policies, is deeply flawed; it is because they mattered that they faced risk, because without their service the necroliberal machine would stop. As one of us has noted elsewhere (Furtado 2022), death must run its course so that our economy may live. This conveys a different sense of disposability—meaning life at the *other's disposal*—which is not captured by the assumption that workers were treated as sacrificial cannon fodder which accompanies the rendering of the pandemic as a traumatic crisis. The only 'failure of communication' here, to use Caruth's words, is our failure to see this.

This section has sought to illustrate how invocations of trauma within IR and security studies have replicated Caruth's approach to trauma as a fracturing event, an external, incomprehensible rupturing of the peace that is presumed to be the normal state of things. IR adopts this conceptualization without asking what constitutes 'peaceful times,' treating peace (and exceptions from it) as temporally demarcated by the traumatic event. Such events become defining critical juncture points in the disciplines of IR and security studies. This temporal treatment of the 'rupturing event' exceptionalizes violence. Violence and its consequence (trauma) are thus positioned as the exception to the norm (peace). As the COVID-19 example in this section illustrates, this framework tends to produce an elision of the persistent, 'normal' violence of systems such as neoliberalism, colonialism, structural racism, and labor exploitation, as we noted in the discussion of essential workers. The discussion on the aftermath of political violence also emphasized how trauma narratives can serve to invalidate and marginalize political voices; one mechanism through which this occurs is the medicalization of trauma. This approach to trauma, and particularly the unproblematic ways whereby it is taken up, misses the full nature of the global distribution of violence, which is based in a kind of epistemological whiteness that we take up further in the next section.

## **Listening (more) carefully to psychoanalysis: From the Freudian revolution to the Lacanian *troumatisme***

Although Caruth claims a place in the Freudian tradition, her theory of trauma has more similarities with the psychiatric paradigm of traumatic stress, in which an external shock causes the fracturing of the mind, than with the complexity of Freudian psychoanalysis. As Caruth repeatedly details, trauma is 'the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge' (Caruth, 1995: 153), a definition that supposedly bridges the gap between Freud's earlier works on hysteria and his late reflections on the death drive. This definition is built on a marriage between neurobiology (Van der Kolk et. al. 1999) and postmodernism (de Man's understanding of figurative language) in which the horror of traumatic events generates a temporal distortion in the victim's capacity to recollect them (Leys, 2000). This



distortion, in turn, creates an incubation period whereby trauma lays dormant until environmental changes trigger its reappearance in a symptom (e.g. hysteric fits, flashbacks, nightmares)—hence, the archetypical figure of the veteran-victim.

However, Caruth's interpretation of Freud misses an important dimension of his work. Her paradigm brushes over the crucial distinction between the *traumatic event* (as the shock) and the *traumatic scene*, understood by Freud to belong precisely to the realm of fantasy and signification. While in general terms an event stands on its own (something simply happens), in the theatrical sense, a scene (such as the Oedipus tragedy) presupposes an audience, a distribution of roles and a story. Though Freud never completely abandoned the traumatic event as an important variable, he progressively distanced himself from the pre-psychoanalytical shock theory foregrounding the role of two important elements in the etiology of trauma: the appearance of traumatic ideas and the primacy of the affective state of the patient over the shock itself in causing the neurotic symptoms. Importantly, ideas become traumatic in Freud not for their incomprehensibility, as Caruth interprets, but precisely because of their deeply uncomfortable meaning.

But what do traumatic ideas mean? In IR, trauma theory is inextricably intertwined with the atrocity paradigm, so one might assume that they represent the unexpected horror behind the liberal façade of international politics: the inhumanity of war, violence, terror, genocide. Following Žižek, one could say that 'in the developed West, trauma is as a rule experienced as a momentary intrusion that violently disturbs our normal daily life' (Žižek, 2009: 126), a framing discussed in the previous section. But there is more at stake here than the discipline's geopolitical myopia. When IR scholarship associates the traumatic with incomprehensibility, or the breakdown of communication/language, it ends up, perhaps inadvertently, echoing a problematic reduction. There are several senses in which an unexpected encounter with the *real*<sup>1</sup> can interrupt our lives and reshape our imaginaries, such as the experience of unexpectedly falling in love (Žižek, 2009). However, IR scholarship reduces the complexity of this encounter by weaving an arbitrary connection between the unexpected and the horrific. Furthermore, in reinforcing the trope of traumatic incomprehensibility the discipline's doxology reduces encounters with the *real* to 'meaningless brutal interruptions that destroy the symbolic texture of the subject's identity' (Žižek, 2009: 125). We are not denying that survivors of trauma struggle to put their experiences into words, we instead suggest that it is equally difficult to describe love. There is an unaccounted leap between announcing something as unexpected, beyond language or comprehension, and assuming its horrifying nature.

But both the Caruthian paradigm and the reduction of the *traumatic real* miss another fundamental nuance of Freudian psychoanalysis, which was lost in translation. As explained by Strachey (2001), English translations of Freud's early psychoanalytical writings often swapped the German term *unverträglich* (incompatible), which Freud used to describe the meaning of traumatic ideas, with *unerträglich* (intolerable or unbearable). Like in the distinction between event and scene, a tenuous but important line divides the two concepts. While something can be unbearable in itself (e.g. pain), incompatibility raises the question *with what?* And this question fundamentally transforms the central points of the doxology of trauma, from a fixation with the external event to an analysis of the interconnection between the domains of the foreign and the intimate; experiences to which Freud's patients were 'normally accustomed' (Freud, 2001b: 56) can become traumatic when they appear invested in ideas *incompatible with the ego*.

The importance of Freud's emphasis on the incompatible becomes clear once compared with Lacan's theory of subjectivity, which radicalizes the findings of the Freudian revolution. Lacan (2006: 355) starts from the observation of the human 'prematurity at birth,' referring to the lack of motor skills and control over bodily functions observed in newborns. This *real* inarticulation, defining of the child's lived experience, is contrasted with an imaginary sense of mastery over oneself offered by their reflection in the mirror. In seeing their specular reflection standing

imposingly (with the help of the baby walker, of course) and in hearing the parental voice ‘do you know who that is? it is you!’, the child becomes invested in an image, a fantasy of control, the appearance of an *autonomous I*, before these conditions are effectively achieved. The fact that the child can barely control its most basic bodily functions and cannot effectively exercise autonomy matters little. This identification triggers a process which Stavrakakis (1999) calls the politics of identification. The specular image is corroborated and congealed as the object of the subject’s desire by the authority of the parental voice (‘it is you!’), but, at the same time, it severs the ties between the subject and their lived, embodied incoherence. What ensues is a fundamental form of misapprehension—between an imaginary ‘I’ and the real embodied being which the imaginary ‘I’ comes to supplement—that marks the birth of the subject in the symbolic. Making use of a metaphor to explain the fundamental alienating nature of subjectivity, Lacan contends that there is no difference between the ‘[mad]man who thinks he is a king’ and the ‘king who thinks he is a king’; every subject entangled in the symbolic network of speech ‘believes he is different [*autre*] than he is’ (Lacan, 2006: 139).

Importantly, Lacan resignifies the notion of rupture, associated with the traumatic, transposing it from an exceptional event that causes suffering to a (non)event, or ‘the missed encounter’ (Lacan, 2018: 55), that conditions subjectivity. This can be seen by the trajectory of the term split (*spaltung*) which first appears in Freud’s and Breuer (2004)’s *Studies in Hysteria*, where the function of splitting—the splitting of acknowledged and unacknowledged elements of a traumatic experience—is defined as a *defense mechanism* in the mind’s handling of an unpleasant reality. But what was in early Freud a defensive, and therefore reactive, mechanism acquires in Lacan the sense of a constitutive element of intersubjectivity. The Lacanian subject is split not because of an external traumatic event, but due to an original *troumatisme*, Lacan’s neologism—from the French *trou*, meaning hole,

This profoundly changes the meaning of the traumatic, adding a social constructionist lens: building on Lacan’s neologism, what constitutes the sense of *troumatique* is the symbolic birth of the subject qua speaking being. It is the *hole* in the symbolic order that prevents the subject from ever achieving the sense of wholeness captured by their specular image (Miller, 2016). It is the unavoidable incompleteness of the Other that produces the violent rigidity of imaginary identities, which, incapable of mastering the *real*, force speaking beings to face the incompatibility between their bodies, their image of themselves and an ideal image as traumatic. As Žižek (2009: 141) clarifies, ‘prior to any empirical traumatic loss is the ‘transcendental’ separation constitutive of the very dimension of subjectivity.’

Though Caruth does engage with Lacan, she misses how consequential this move is. In the Lacanian radicalization of Freud, fantasies (constituted in the interplay between imaginary and the symbolic) become complicit in the reproduction of the *troumatique* as the failure of symbolization—in the first instance, the masking of the subject’s own ‘true’ incompatibility with ‘itself.’ This recognition has two important repercussions for a theory of trauma, and for an analytic of global suffering that moves beyond the confines of the Caruthian paradigm. First, it expands what we identify as *suffering that matters* beyond horrific, exceptional events towards a meticulous engagement with the subject’s historicity. The *troumatisme* forces us to investigate the hidden corners of the subjective dimension often disregarded as unimportant. Second, it resituates the sense of dread from an unbearable event to a socially construed and culturally imposed sense of incompatibility between the specular image and embodied existence, which is what makes the acknowledge of the latter unbearable. While the Caruthian event is traumatic in itself, there can be no understanding of the Lacanian *troumatique* outside the subject’s life story. In fact, it is this historicity that dictates why certain encounters will be experienced as traumatic to some and not others and how. And it is

precisely this point—the attention to historicity—that the uses of psychoanalysis in the Black Radical Tradition allows us to further radicalize.

## **Liberation in the real: The geopolitical grounding of the lack in the Black Radical Tradition**

The concept of trauma speaks to an ‘important and as yet unresolved issue in contemporary post-colonial criticism’ (Visser, 2011: 271). The often-uncritical export of the language of trauma to non-Western contexts has been problematized by practitioners who highlight the cultural specificity of the concept (Bracken and Petty, 1998). Whitehead (2008: 13) argues that trauma is to be considered ‘inseparable from the particular concerns of Western culture’, which would make it incapable to translate non-Western experience of angst and suffering such as the Maya Ixil word *txitzi’n* (Arias, 2015). Needless to say, postcolonial/decolonial theories and psychoanalytical approaches do not always see eye to eye. Yet, the description of trauma as decidedly and unambiguously a Western concept excludes from the picture the fruitful reflections on colonial/racial trauma and the uses of psychoanalysis in the Francophone and Lusophone Black Radical Tradition.<sup>2</sup> We find in the works of Achille Mbembe, Frantz Fanon, Grada Kilomba, Beatriz Nascimento and Lélia Gonzalez invaluable reworkings of Freudian and Lacanian themes. These writings fundamentally point towards an alternative reading of trauma beyond the doxology of the concept in IR.

Grada Kilomba’s *Plantation Memories* (2008) is perhaps the most influential overt engagement with trauma, where Kilomba provides an in-depth analysis of the testimonies of experiences of everyday racism in Germany by six black women. *Plantation Memories* explains everyday acts of racism, experienced by the author and her interviewees, as matching traditional descriptions of a traumatic experience. This leads to the first problem or a contradiction between Kilomba’s idea of everyday racism and the doxology of trauma: how can we see racism, something to be *expected* and *easily understood* in a white supremacist order, as the incomprehensible/unexpected event? Kilomba’s ingenious answer is that positing quotidian racism as traumatic ‘is not to say that racism is not expected—unfortunately it is—but the violence and intensity of everyday racism are such that, although expected, they always recreate this element of surprise and shock . . . it is too overwhelming’ (Kilomba, 2008: 134).

Kilomba’s formula evidences the aporias we have discussed so far: the ambiguity between the eventful/non-eventful or the (in)comprehensible nature of trauma and the temptation to resolve them by resorting to the economy of homeostasis (an experience is too overwhelming and hence breaks into the psyche from outside). But her response provides an entry point to illustrate, in light of colonial trauma, the interconnection between the Lacanian neologism *troumatisme* and the reflections of Francophone and Lusophone Black Radical scholars.

Let us begin by following Kilomba’s return to Fanon, via the Freudian camp. The question of compatibility between Fanon and psychoanalysis aside (Maldonado-Torres et al., 2021; Vieira, 2019; Wright, 2017), the Lacanian theme of (mis)identification plays an interesting role in his 1952 manuscript. Although Fanon voices reservations towards some of Lacan’s views, both seem to build their theories of subjectivity from different versions of the process of (mis)identification. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon denounces the failure of psychoanalysts in treating the conditions of the colonized due to a historical neglect of their experiences, what we would call today epistemological whiteness. He criticizes the fact ‘that neither Freud nor Adler nor even the cosmic Jung took the black man into consideration’, claiming that ‘the Oedipus complex is far from being a black complex’ (Fanon, 2008: 130). He (mis)takes Freudian theory for an individualizing approach and rejects the Eurocentric uses of psychoanalytic concepts (Fanon, 2008). But in a three-page

long footnote in the chapter *The Black Man and Psychopathology*, Fanon engages with Lacan's mirror stage, or the fundamental structure of the imaginary register described above. He sees in the school writings of Antillean children, in the way they behaved like 'genuine Parisians and . . . repeated: "I like going on vacation as I can run through the fields, breathe in the fresh air, and come home with *pink* cheeks"' (Fanon, 2008: 140, note 25), the evidence of a fundamental alienation accords colonialism a psychopathological face: that due to 'an impulsive cultural imposition' (Fanon, 2008: 167) the 'Antillean cannot recognise the fact of being black' (Fanon, 2008: 140, note 25).

Fanon delineates, in relation to the Antilleans, the process whereby the ideal-I of the colonized, their reflection in the mirror, is construed not only as a fictive *autonomous I*, but most importantly, *as mistakenly belonging to a white world* which will never grant them the right to enjoy an *autonomous life*. It is this compound element of misrecognition, more so than the violence of the shock itself, that infuses the lives of the colonized with a dual traumatic/*troumatique* nature. While the Antillean child sees themselves metaphorically as Parisian, that is, as indistinct from the other, the realization of this fantasy is barred by a white colonial society, which is all too keen to remind said child of their place in the global division of merit and worth.

To be clear, and perhaps diverging from the Fanonian text slightly, the problem is not that the Antillean child is wrong to imagine themselves as an autonomous *I*—at least they are not any more wrong than their European counterpart. The problem is that they are not allowed to revel in this fantasy, to take part in a communally sanctioned sense of reality which would feed the dream of an autonomous life within the boundaries of the white world. Perhaps it is worthwhile going back to the Lacanian metaphor of the king and the madman to express the two formally similar, but qualitatively different forms of alienation and suffering which both connect and separate the colonizers (king) and the colonized (madman). While it is certainly true that both misapprehend their own identities, thereby misperceiving themselves as something other than they are, one fundamental difference remains. The king is allowed to rejoice in his folly, which is socially sanctioned as a foundational, collective fantasy. This treatment is not extended to the madman who thinks he is a king. He is pathologized, excluded, and incarcerated. Similarly, the "[colonised] Antillean . . . relives the same fantasies as a European" (Fanon, 2008: 147), but while the delusions of the European are announced as reason, the dreams of the colonized are violently suppressed.

It is only via the interplay between foreign (a culture that is imposed) and intimate (the subject's desire) that the simplicity of the quotidian is infused with the overwhelming violence of which Kilomba speaks—an interplay so clearly expressed by Fanon's words '[w]hile I was forgetting, forgiving, and wanting only to love, my message was flung back in my face like a slap' (Fanon, 2008: 86). It is here that the symbolic violence of a white order (N-word) is materialized and somatized as pain, as recounted by one of Kilomba's interviewees. The symbolic regime expresses in the black individual the 'pain of still not belonging to the society to which you gave everything you had, to which still, today, you give what is left of yourself' (Nascimento et al., 2023: 90). The simple sound of a child's voice 'Mama, see the N—' (Fanon, 2008: 84) is experienced as a catastrophic event (Wright, 2017), a disorientating, nauseating encounter that cuts through the flesh: 'the world amputated my enthusiasm' (Fanon, 2008: 83–84); 'for me going out in the street was torture' (Nascimento et al., 2023: 140).

This violence is only capable of transgressing the boundaries between symbolic and physical violence because of a prior amputation that had already taken place: the hole left by the wound which rips opens the fantasy of autonomy fracturing the body of the colonized. As Fanon recounts, 'I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors' (Fanon, 2008: 84). Reflecting upon the historical continuum between the slave trade and present-day forms of alienation, and the consequences for displaced Bantu communities and their descendants in the Americas,

Beatriz Nascimento summarizes this wound as: ‘*a experiencia da perda da imagem, a experiencia do exilio* / the experience of the loss of image, the experience of exile’ (Nascimento and Gerber, 1989).

In the psychoanalytical writings of the Black Radical Tradition, the Lacanian notion of the symbolic as the ‘*Other’s discourse*’ (Lacan, 2006: 10) takes on a radical geopolitical sense. Mbembe (2001, 2017) argues that the signifier *Africa* plays an important role in the symbolic architecture of the colonial/white world, as a representation of the limits of humanity. It is ‘one of the metaphors through which the West represents the origin of its own norms, develops a self-image, and integrates this image into the set of signifiers asserting what it supposes to be its identity’ (2001: 2).<sup>3</sup> And, for that reason, it ‘is not simply *part* of its imaginary significations, it is *one* of those significations’ (2001: 2). In Lacanian parlance, *Africa* constitutes a geopolitical grounding of the lack beyond the Pillars of Hercules (the symbolic limits of Europe), built on a constellation of signifiers which link the body, the race, and the ancestors of the colonized with inhumanity and unreality, multiplying their suffering and alienation. The European can only somehow circumvent the constitutive lack in a fantasy of autonomy because that fantasy chains the non-European to the role of a representative ‘of all that is incomplete, mutilated, and unfinished’ (Mbembe, 2001: 1). Gonzalez (1988) describes the particular form of racism that emerges from this symbolic relation, which she identifies with the ideologies of whitening, assimilationism, and racial democracy abundant in Franco-Iberian (post)colonies, such as Fanon’s Martinique and her home country Brazil, as racism by abnegation or denial. By mobilizing the Freudian category of *Verneinung* (denial/abnegation), she denounces the double gesture of racist denial that consists in ‘the very negation of the idea of . . . common humanity’ (Mbembe, 2017: 54) and the denial that this negation ever takes place. The end result is that the black person can only ‘cancel yourself out and start to live another life, floating with nowhere to land, without references and without parameters for what your peculiar shape should be’ (Nascimento et al., 2023: 142).

But what do these observations mean for a theory of trauma? First, a serious engagement with the psychoanalytical reflection of scholars in the Black Radical Tradition—without dismissing trauma as a strictly Western concept—invites a reassessment of the heuristic privilege afforded to the traumatic event in IR. Colonial trauma, as it were, happens in this space of the (un)eventful. A violent encounter with the other, perhaps, but only insofar as a missed encounter—the missed appointment with the Other’s recognition, promised, but forever postponed by a colonial/white tragedy in which there are only two roles for the colonized: villain or sidekick. We can most clearly witness this duality between the event and the uneventful in Fanon’s exploration of clinical cases of post-traumatic stress during the Algerian war of liberation (Fanon, 1963; Wright, 2017). Before venturing into the neuroses caused by the colonial war, Fanon adds an important caveat: ‘the truth is that colonialism in its essence was already taking on the aspect of a fertile purveyor of psychiatric hospitals . . . because it is a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity’ (Fanon, 1963: 200).

Second, an engagement with the concepts of racial/colonial trauma opens the space to move beyond the Caruthian trope of the traumatic real, by shifting blame for sources of violence and suffering from the real towards the symbolic. Understanding the links between the colonial *traumatisme* and the form of subjectivity constituted in a floating state, in suffering—as Lacan (2006) would put it, *en souffrance* (pending)—enables scholars to seriously reconsider how the question of scholarly positionality informs the doxology of trauma in IR. It forces us to face the more-than-overdue question of whose imaginary is being reproduced by definitions of the symbolic as a fantasy of safety and control. Which form of subjectivity can assume, so naturally and unreflectively, that the postcolonial order provides a sense of peace, protection and mastery in/of the world? More importantly, perhaps, it raises questions about the uncomfortable association between indistinction



and horror, which the discipline so naturally links to the traumatic rupture. What are the social and political conditions that work to make indistinction horrifying, or rather, who—in the sense of a social group and a form of subjectivity—meets the lack of distinctions with horror?

What emerges from the reflections of the Lusophone Black Radical Tradition is a vision of the *real* as infused with a liberatory potential. Whereas in the doxology of trauma the *real*—the violent encounters that rupture the liberal fantasy of safety and control—is often described as the source of trauma and horror, for Nascimento, Gonzalez and others, the *real* can be a source of liberation, the desire for life and the living energy of desire that cannot be contained, controlled, and enslaved by the (white) symbolic order. The *real*, as it were, this diachronic and uncontrollable vital force, in Gonzalez's (1988: 78) words the '*explosão criadora de algo desconhecido* [the explosive creation of something unknown]' is an element that reveals the incompleteness of the symbolic and, therefore, of any form of domination. The vital force of the *real*, a force so slippery that it resists any attempt at enslavement, is that which confirms that the space for an alternative life exists; that things could be other than they are. It is this sense of liberation that Nascimento (2023) describes when she recounts seeing for the first time the image of 1968 Olympic medalists Tommie Smith and John Carlos raising their fists in Mexico City. The beginnings of her political activism were 'the first stirrings toward a social change that was beginning to crystalize in every continent of the world, no longer in the *Imaginary*, but in the *Real*' (2023: 308).

What emerges in this space, fracturing the logical architecture of the colonial order, is the undeniable and radical equality of all speaking beings. We are not talking about an assimilationist view of equality before the Law, but the real equality born precisely out of indistinction, out of the impossible realization of symbolic distinctions between the colonizers and the colonized. The *real*, in this counter-version, becomes an antidote to the colonial *racism by abnegation* forcing the European to '[A]ccept himself to be as miserable as those he enslaved, as hungry as them, as 'untaught' as them—or even more so' (Nascimento et al., 2023: 92). *Real* change involves the realization that, when the subalterns speak, they articulate loud and clear a terrifying truth, which indeed fractures the symbolic texture of European identity; as masterfully conveyed by Lélia Gonzalez, '*a gente diz que o rei tá pelado. E o corpo do rei é preto e o rei é Escravo* [We say the king is naked. That his body is black and the king is a Slave]' (Gonzalez, 1984: 239).

## Reimagining and complicating trauma: Some conclusions

This article has sought to excavate the functioning of a certain conceptualization of trauma in IR as a doxology. This framing of trauma, as an external incomprehensible shock, has structured our understandings of concepts ranging from community formation to security policies and questions of transitional and social justice. We suggested that this understanding of trauma remains fundamentally tied to a psychiatric and medicalizing lens, treating trauma as an injury in need of remedy, yet which also situates the traumatized as displaced from their own representation, given the purported impossibility of such representation. We illustrated the potentially harmful impacts of this with regard to the medicalization of the post-atrocity trauma survivor, and the normalized exceptionality and disposability of the COVID-19 case. We have raised questions about whose trauma is being elevated by the use of this particular form of trauma theory. We then sought to complicate the theoretical picture of trauma through returns to Freud and Lacan, as well as the uses of psychoanalysis in Fanon, Kilomba, Mbembe, Nascimento and Gonzalez. This latter theoretical exploration follows on and extends Ali Howell's (2011: 11) exhortation to IR to 'develop a critical approach toward the operation of the psy disciplines in global politics', and to view psychology as a technology of governance.

Thinking differently about trauma highlights that suffering, trauma, or trauma-inducing events or structures are not exceptional but are instead produced through systems of disposability and neoliberalism that have been routinized and normalized, and trauma narratives can, at times, serve to invalidate resistance to these systems. It is precisely the invocation of trauma that catastrophizes violence, by placing it outside of the bounds of representation, thus serving particular political ends, specifically the depoliticization of trauma itself. Indeed, trauma has been used in various ways to catastrophize certain types of violence, thereby eliding the ordinary forms of violence that may be ongoing, as we saw in the rhetoric of disposability during the COVID-19 pandemic. Rethinking trauma in terms of how the concept is itself filled with content, and that the traumatic does not exist as a truth outside of a specific symbolic order, can help us better grasp the ways the traumatic is mobilized to sustain particular symbolic orders of violence, the extreme, the banal, and everything in between. Indeed, it can also help us better grasp how we as scholars are implicated in this deployment of the traumatic. As Penttinen notes, ‘it is naïve to think that persons who have been traumatized are somewhere else other than the academy’ (Penttinen, 2016: 131).

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## Notes

1. The domain Lacan associated with the breakdown of meaning.
2. Beatriz Nascimento and Lélia Gonzalez were intellectuals and members of the *Movimento Negro Unificado* (Unified Black Movement) founded in 1978 during the Military Regime in Brazil. Gonzalez was also involved in the Freudian School in Rio.
3. It is because of this metaphorical role and the fluidity of the signifier that we use the terms colonized, Antillean, and Black as interchangeable signs of degrees of inhumanity.

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