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SOCIAL TRAUMA AND SERIAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY *Healing and Beyond*

The problem with mapping distress in the mind of the individual is that such a cartography tends to overlook the fact that the causes, locus, and consequences of collective violence are predominantly social.

—Arthur Kleinman (1995b, 181–82)

I believe that most Jews, even the most assimilated, walk around with a subliminal fear of anti-Semitism the way most women walk around with a subliminal fear of rape.

—Evelyn T. Beck (1991, 22)

The serial self-representational practices of two Canadian immigrant women autobiographers, and the insights their narratives offer into the vicissitudes of self-construction in the face of social trauma located at the intersections of gender and race/ethnicity/religion, are the focus of this essay. In 1972, Fredelle Bruser Maynard published *Raisins and Almonds*, an account—she would belatedly acknowledge—of “the anguish, the deep sense of exclusion” (1989, 133) she experienced “growing up Jewish and alien” in the small towns of western Canada during the 1920s and 1930s (1985, xix).¹ It was followed in 1989 by *The Tree of Life*, a volume focused on her adult life and introduced as “tougher ... [and] truer” than the earlier memoir (xxi). Elly Danica’s 1988 incest narrative, *Don’t: A Woman’s Word*, also set in western Canada and speaking (however obliquely) to the immigrant experience, is a text composed of numbered fragments that opens with the abused child’s crushing pain and closes with the adult survivor’s defiant “I am” (94). It was followed in 1996 by *Beyond Don’t: Dreaming Past the Dark*. In each case, I want to suggest, the second volume does more than

take up where the earlier one had left off, and the return to (and of) the past is governed by a logic that partakes of (but also exceeds) a traumatic wound that is “not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly” (Caruth 1996, 4). In each case, the first autobiographical foray—the first attempt to work through trauma—both succeeds and fails, preparing the way for its sequel.

The autobiographers themselves tell us the measure of their success. *Raisins and Almonds* had its genesis, Maynard explains, in “a small painful experience of anti-Semitism” that triggered “a flood of memories ... [releasing] sorrows long held in check” (1989, xx–xxi). The incident, retold three times over the course of the two volumes, captures Maynard’s experience of abjection as both a woman and a Jew. The incident occurs during a work trip to Atlantic City where Maynard—a prize-winning PhD graduate married to a non-Jew and living a thoroughly assimilated life in a New England university town—has to grade college entrance examinations (work she was able to get, ironically, on the recommendation of a former student), having lost her university teaching position when she became pregnant with her first child. The crushing moment comes when a fellow examiner reports to her what he thinks is an amusing conversation he overheard between two college board officials discussing minority-group pressures for representation: “‘Well,’ said No. 1, ‘we’ve got our token black.’ ‘Oh?’ said No. 2, ‘Who?’ ‘Fredelle Maynard,’ said No. 1. And No. 2 said, ‘Fredelle Maynard’s not our black. She’s our Jew’” (1989, 133). The incident leads to a “volcanic eruption” of feeling for Maynard (1985, ix) and the writing of *Raisins and Almonds*, a book that she recognizes in retrospect fundamentally changed her life: “I realized, after long confusion, who I was and wanted to be” (ix). Shortly after its publication in 1985, her marriage of twenty-five years to (the gentile) Max Maynard ends, and the self-questioning provoked by the autobiographical project culminates in the recognition that “my essential nature ... was intimately involved with my Jewishness” (1989, xvii).

Danica, too, describes the writing of the first volume of her autobiography as an enabling process of self-recovery, a re-membering of a self shattered by her father’s abuse of her from the age of four until she left his house (never a home) at eighteen: “the daily writing was where and how I worked towards a re-integration of the aspects of Self which had been fragmented” (qtd. in Williamson 1993, 80–81). Although not Jewish, Danica also experienced rejection and marginalization as a non-English-speaking immigrant. Here, however, I am primarily interested in the comparability of the trauma she experienced as a woman (incest as a type

of gendered violence) and that experienced by Maynard as a Jew (anti-Semitism as a type of racialized violence). Like Maynard, Danica returns to her experience in spite of the apparent therapeutic success of her first account. Why, then, if the first writing process was so effective, do these autobiographers need to revisit the past and re-enter that scene in which “a subject-in-process is constructed” (Gilmore 2001, 97)? Perhaps, as the remainder of this essay will seek to argue, it is because for those subjected to the “‘normal’ insidious traumata” suffered simply for being “a woman, a Jew” (Brown 1995, 109), recovery remains elusive and healing proves an insufficient idiom with which to dream past the dark.

These two serial autobiographies can serve to engage trauma theory and autobiographical practice as mutually illuminating explorations of individual and social worlds in distress. Of particular interest to my project are recent developments in trauma theory that challenge two key aspects of earlier definitions of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): the designation of the trauma-inducing stressor as an event that is “outside the range of usual human experience” (American Psychiatric Association [APA] 1994, 783), and the exclusive focus on the pathology of the patient. The work of Judith Herman and Arthur Kleinman, among others, has been instrumental in offering both a critique of this model and an alternative vision. Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) shifts the focus of analysis from the impact of exceptional, circumscribed, traumatic events to the effects of prolonged and all-too-common social traumata. Kleinman’s *Writing at the Margin* spells out the insidious consequences of a medicalizing and pathologizing discourse of trauma wherein “social problems are transformed into the problems of individuals” (1995b, 177). The call for an approach to trauma that would recognize the pervasiveness of stressors that are not accidental but “of human design” (Herman 1992, 7)—such as the social traumata of prejudice and exclusion that find their expression in racism, classism, sexism, and ageism (Adams 1990; Sanchez-Hucles 1998)—has not gone unheeded. One is heartened by changes to the American Psychiatric Association’s most recent *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR, 2000)*, indicating a willingness to broach the issue of social traumata. While the *DSM-IV-TR* still identifies the exposure to an extreme traumatic stressor involving a threat to one’s *physical*, but not *psychic*, integrity as a primary diagnostic feature of PTSD, it does acknowledge the role played by psychosocial stressors, noting that PTSD “may be especially severe or long lasting when the stressor is of human design” (464). It is “trauma of human design” that shapes the lives and autobiographical projects of Maynard and Danica. Their narratives, in turn,

enable us to explore not only “the faces of oppression” (Nelson 2001, 108) that harm subjects, but also the range of strategies employed by such subjects to (re)gain agency.

Psychosocial stressors, P.L. Adams reports, “are now known to weigh heavily on several population groups”: topping the list of groups with known heightened risk or vulnerability are “Females” and “Discrimination-oppressed minority groups” (1990, 379). Two aspects of the analysis of the social trauma suffered by such groups are of particular relevance to the present discussion: the recognition that the *severing of attachments*—the experience of “alienation” and “estrangement” from self and others (367)—is a defining feature of the traumatic experience, as is the acknowledgment that the *pursuit of belonging* is a crucial component of the process of healing and recovery. The damage inflicted by *social* trauma—understood as the sanctioned and pervasive betrayal of affiliative bonds affecting the full range of human interactions, from the most intimate to the institutional—is, therefore, particularly acute. Experiences of social betrayal make healing difficult if not impossible since all three stages of recovery—“establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivors and their community” (Herman 1992, 3)—depend on the possibility of envisaging a world in which one can attain a sense “of familiarity, of being known, of communion” (1992, 236). Racism and sexism are the traumas that shape the lives of Maynard and Danica, and their autobiographical practice attests to both the severity of these assaults and the formidable challenge that recovery-as-belonging poses for such subjects.

It is perhaps no accident that Freud’s foundational theorization of trauma emerged in the context of his own intimate familiarity with destructive gender and race ideologies. Although Freud would eventually repudiate his earlier insights into trauma being a response to *actual* experiences of violation, opting instead for a theory of “intrapsychic reality and subjective experience” (Van der Kolk, Weisaeth, and van der Hart 1996, 55), his *Autobiographical Study* suggests (obliquely, symptomatically) that psychoanalysis itself has its roots in, and is a response to, exactly these types of external violence. *An Autobiographical Study* is framed by the two forms of persecution that gave Freud’s life its shape: the anti-Semitism that precipitated the family’s migrations over the centuries, and continued to dictate his status as “an alien because I was a Jew” (1948, 14), and his effective banishment from the Society of Medicine, early on in his career, because of his work on *male* hysteria. Freud would recover from the gender-related blow by finding/founding his professional community of belonging in psychoanalysis and its acceptable study of female hysteria. His far more sin-

ister fate as a racialized subject, however, is captured in a laconic comment he made at the conclusion of his 1935 Postscript to *An Autobiographical Study*. Referring to the Goethe prize awarded him in 1930, Freud writes, “This was the climax of my life as a citizen. Soon afterwards the boundaries of *our country* narrowed and the nation would know no more of *us*” (1948, 135; emphasis added). The pronominal slippage here is poignantly revealing—this is Freud’s primal scene of trauma as a secular, assimilated, German Jew: the banishment from the collectivity, the brutal denial of belonging.

Fredelle Bruser Maynard, too, would long in vain to say “our country.” Growing up as the daughter of Russian Jewish immigrants, she was the only Jewish child in the small prairie towns the family would move to in a series of failed attempts to integrate socially or economically. She would long to escape the “small playground persecutions” (1989, xiv), the schoolyard taunts of “*you lousy kike*” (1985, 102) and “*you killed Christ*” (1985, 21); the teachers rewarding her correct answers with “We don’t need your kind to tell us what’s what” (1985, 76); the persistent sense that the world around her was “alien if not actively hostile” (1989, xiv). Such anti-Semitism, the adult autobiographer recognizes, “must have been less crushing to those of my friends whose Jewishness was an active, positive force ... For me, so ambiguous, so ill-defined a Jew, anti-Semitism was peculiarly painful” (1985, xiv).² The title of *Raisins and Almonds* seeks to evoke the sweet promises of the Yiddish lullaby sung to her as a child: “The goat goes tripping down the street/ To buy raisins and almonds for my sweet/ ... / Goodness and health are the best things to own,/ Freidele will read Torah when she is grown” (1985, epigraph), but the opening of the autobiography leaves a distinctly sour taste on the tongue. The autobiographical narrator recalls, “Being Jewish, I had long grown accustomed to isolation and difference. Difference was in my bones and blood, and in the pattern of my separate life ... All year *I walked in the shadow of difference*; but at Christmas above all, I tasted it sour on my tongue” (1985, 19–21; emphasis added).

Read as a symptomatology of “complex post-traumatic stress disorder” (Herman 1992, 119), *Raisins and Almonds* and *The Tree of Life* tell the story of a subject who has walked in the shadow of a *double* difference: her racialized difference as a Jew, and her gendered difference as a female within both the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds. Although Maynard did not intend it to be so, the lullaby’s reference to the Torah is ironic, for its promise that “Freidele will read Torah when she is grown” is belied by a millennia-old tradition in which “the equation of Jewishness

with maleness is supported not only by women's exclusion from those traditional religious practices central to Judaism—prayer and study—but by the absence of positive images of women as holy” (Heschel 1991, 34).³

To the question “*Who am I?*” (1985, ix), Maynard's response at the conclusion of the first volume is “Woman and Jew, I am also my parents' child” (1985, 196). This, in turn, becomes the lens through which the past is reconstructed in the second volume. Maynard presents *The Tree of Life* as a narrative of self-discovery culminating in a self- and life-affirming identity as a Jew and a mature woman in charge of her life. Nevertheless, what the two autobiographical volumes demonstrate most compellingly is the extent and impact of the traumas she suffered—as a Jew, a woman, and her parents' child—and the difficulties of acceding to personal and social agency under such conditions. From the beginning, the Freidele of the lullaby is a child of survivors, born into a world in which the violence against Jews and against women that marked her parents continues to define the parameters of her life. She grows up with “tales of pogroms” (1989, 25), and her mother's repeated “tales of affliction” (138) about growing up in a household “where boys were kings and girls scullery maids” (193–94), and of her rape at the age of nine by a Russian soldier (139).

Although Maynard seems unaware of her father's part in perpetuating a damaging gender ideology, her observations about his sexualizing view of women (his daughters included), defining them exclusively in relation to men, are telling (1985, 194). Little wonder, then, that with her sense of self so severely undermined she would seek validation from a male and a gentile, only to find herself betrayed again. The marriage becomes a site of repeated trauma, but Maynard's narration of it in *The Tree of Life* suggests an even more complex psychosocial reality (which space constraints prevent me from exploring here), raising difficult questions about the price of identity and/as difference. Maynard recounts the many hurtful ways in which Max Maynard's “unease with a Jewish wife” (1989, 69) manifested itself, but she also reflects on her own (and her family's) ambivalent attitude towards gentiles and their entrenched “stereotypes of the non-Jewish world” (68).

The world of her adult life offers Maynard no respite from the traumas of gender and race, and when there is little change in the external trauma-inducing reality, there can be little hope for change in the internal psychic condition. Maynard's two autobiographical volumes are framed by descriptions of the prairie landscape of her childhood (1985, 199–200; 1989, xx). These descriptions foreground her sense of powerlessness and

of being alone in the world, evoking the psychic landscape of trauma: a feeling of being “utterly abandoned, utterly alone,” trapped in a situation where “neither resistance nor escape is possible” (Herman 1992, 52, 34). Objective reality makes escape impossible: learning and knowledge, for example, are the young Fredelle Bruser’s first lines of defence and the adult Maynard’s still-hoped-for means of escaping her “outsiderness” (1989, 78), but they prove of little use in a world where teachers can be racist (1985, 76) and the academy openly discriminates against women (1989, 78).

Resistance, too, proves beyond reach, as the possibility of social critique eludes Maynard, who fails to make the connections, necessary for recovery, between one’s experiences and “the social and material conditions engendering these experiences” (Profitt 2000, 103). She remains, for example, virtually silent on the Holocaust (1985, 155); the trauma of gender remains unexamined as both volumes conclude with an uncritical portrayal of a male figure as saviour, showing the mature woman to be still driven by the neediness of the young girl who was taught to “worship the father” (Buss 1993, 157). Maynard’s experience as an economically disenfranchised, classed subject (Rimstead 2001, 195) remains equally unexamined. Such distancing, in turn, mitigates against any sense of solidarity or identification with others in a similar predicament. Finally, even the Jewishness Maynard reclaims later in life seems to offer little comfort. A combination of factors—the legacy of anti-Semitism, her parents’ own isolation as Jews, and her secular upbringing (see Schaub 1997)—leaves Maynard with little more than superficialities from which to form a meaningful sense of Jewishness. At the close of the second volume, she responds to her granddaughter’s question “What’s Jewish?” by talking about “Jewish food, Jewish holidays ... [and] the solemn bar mitzvah procession, following the Torah in its tasselled, filigreed silver case, that celebrates a Jewish male’s coming of age” (1989, 243). The irony of trying to attract her granddaughter to Jewish life by telling her of a ritual that excludes her as a female seems to escape Maynard, but here, as elsewhere in the two volumes, the autobiographical text seems to speak a truth—about the impassable social world it creates—that its narrator cannot fully voice.

More overt about the effects of trauma, Elly Danica’s autobiographical narratives also offer a more hopeful trajectory. Like Maynard, Danica too struggles with the aloneness that is the condition of collective racialized and gendered trauma. As “an immigrant, a foreigner, a woman” she knows the feel of multiple blows and the taste of defeat:

When I was a child, denial became a way of life. At school—if I wanted to get home without being waylaid by bullies and beaten up for my difference—I was required to deny that I had been born in Holland, spoke Dutch as my first language and was an immigrant. At home denial was how I learned to see the abuse I endured as normal or inevitable. (1996, 21)

Having given voice in *Don't* to the abused child who will always be a part of the grown woman,⁴ Danica seeks to find her adult voice in *Beyond Don't*. The second volume puts the autobiographical act to many uses: reclaiming those other parts of her self that could not have been brought into the incest narrative; resisting the new ways in which her childhood experiences seem to rule her life now that she has come to be perceived solely as an incest victim; reinventing herself; and continuing to work through her relationships with her family of origin. Danica's second volume, like Maynard's, revisits her relationship with her mother, while also rethinking the very terms of kinship: "I'm learning that family need not be the collection of people into which you are born ... but it is hard to give up entirely on one's family of origin" (1996, 92).

Ultimately, Danica both acknowledges that restoring ruptured attachments is imperative if healing is to proceed, and recognizes that, for her, kinship will remain unattainable: "It is possible that, as an immigrant child, bookish, odd, sad and depressed, and further distanced by the abuse I was experiencing, I made isolation a habit" (1996, 90). Unlike Maynard, however, Danica does succeed in voicing a meaningful "we," as she resolves to make the transition from speaking personally to speaking politically in order to address "the social and political causes of child sexual abuse" (1996, 95). At the conclusion of *Beyond Don't*, Danica writes, "We need to build communities in which the priority is the care, protection, nurturance, needs and rights of children and other vulnerable people" (1996, 151). Her second autobiographical volume is indeed an active gesture towards the creation of such a community. In Danica's case, the autobiographical return is for the purpose of moving beyond healing in pursuit of personal and collective transformation, with the goals of "self-recovery, social analysis, and collective action" (Profitt 2000, 102).

As a practice that allows a plural present self to grapple with its past(s), serial autobiography is both a symptom of and an antidote to the rupture that is trauma's aftermath—that "breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world" (Caruth 1996, 4). As a genre that draws on both the confessional and the testimonial, autobiography is particularly well suited not only to assist in the process of individual recovery but also to contribute to a "project of social change" (Alcoff and Gray 1993, 283). Ulti-

mately, what writing in a public form can accomplish that the private journal or the therapy session cannot is *intervention in the public sphere*, by creating, for example, “an alternative jurisdiction” (Gilmore 2003, 715); by daring to contest oppressive master narratives (Nelson 2001, 169); by militating against—and compelling the reader to reconsider—the social and material conditions that engender trauma. Narratives like Maynard’s and Danica’s can, and should, lead us to ask “whether we need healing or non-violent, but far-reaching, revolution” (Horsman 1999, 45).

NOTES

- 1 This pattern of delayed re/cognition—constitutive of the belatedness of trauma—resonates with the larger historical context within which Maynard’s experience is embedded. In 1934, the year Fredelle Bruser turned twelve, a Canadian Jewish Congress study “uncovered such extensive anti-Semitism, most of it relatively legal, that the report was never released lest it prove demoralizing to Canadian Jews and help legitimate anti-Semitic expressions” (Weinfeld 2001, 322).
- 2 Waddington, a contemporary of Maynard’s who also grew up on the Canadian prairies as a daughter of Jewish immigrants, describes a similar response to the prevailing anti-Semitism (1989, 6).
- 3 Norma Joseph offers this succinct overview: “Debates concerning the propriety of teaching women emanate from early rabbinic literature. The Talmud states that women were considered exempt from the obligation to study Torah ... In fact, the Mishnah in *Sotah* 3:4 and the ensuing Talmudic debate posit the question of whether women were even allowed to study” (1995; 207).
- 4 For discussions of Danica’s *Don’t*, see Warley (1992) and Winter (1996).