

*This essay draws a great deal on the ideas developed in "The Web as War Machine," a Comparative Literature Senior Thesis, University of Virginia, Spring 2003.*

It has been theorized by many authors that what is traumatic is really but a cognitive dissonance. Some rather Freudian thinkers see trauma as an inability to linguistically code the nature of an event, creating from it a subconscious construct inassimilable into conscious thought, requiring its repression into the unconscious or subconscious as a repetitive activity or a series of destructive mental behaviors. Yet this model, useful perhaps for its notion of dissociation, is too static, too monolithic, supposing as it does the *a priori* existence of a thinking subject (and an all pervasive grounds for knowledge); we are forced into seeing trauma as that which comes only from Outside; trauma becomes the introduction of an alien species, rather than native to the primary state of existence. Instead, we ought to consider trauma not as a sort of foreign body of overcoded knowledge, incompatible or somehow incomprehensible in terms of the subject's identity or history, but rather as that deterritorialization induced by an encounter with the war machine—in any of its various manifestations, but most of all that which renders our existence absurd. Trauma is not the introduction of foreign material, but a subversion of the linguistic foundations of existence that we so often take for granted.

I would now like to explore a theoretical basis for trauma as a cognitive event, its roles and effects, and determine whether or not it is possible for the postmodern subject—as defined in other essays—to even be traumatized at all. As it has been said that the postmodern subject exists in a constant state of trauma—that is, in a state of persistent epistemological rupture, a constant engagement and return to the line of flight rather than the overcoded molecular line—it would seem that trauma, as discussed by Bataille and others, should be impossible, or at least impossible to categorize separately. And yet the explorations we have conducted previously in this area hint that while the definition of trauma may be subtly rearranged by this reconsidered subjective structure, the notion of trauma itself is still quite pertinent, and that the postmodern condition that Lyotard writes about, one which we envisioned at the end of the last essay, does not offer the subject any sort of

psychological protection. It is possible that the cognitive model we develop here may be able to address gaps in current psychobiological models.

It seems, to start with, that we argue from a contradiction. How can a subject be “always already” in a state of trauma and still be further “traumatized?” What would be the qualitative difference? Wouldn’t it be more useful, say, to ask about the qualities of postmodern existence, instead? How is “trauma” as a separate event possible if what we have heretofore called “trauma” has already become a sort of baseline steady state? Surely the contradiction our position implies also means that it is impossible—that these positions must be mutually exclusive. For example, trauma as defined by psychoanalysis presupposes a unitary subject with binding psychological structures; cognitive models, too, assume a unitary subject with a singly binding narrative of subjectivity. But the distributed model of the subject (the rhizome) which dissolves the unitary subject in favor of a subject of a composite, patchwork narrative drawn from multiple groups leads directly in its conception to a state of trauma (as discussed in section 1.8 of the previous essay), or rather, a state of deterritorialization, an end of the subject.

Trauma should not be considered a development, but rather a return to a somehow more native state, almost as Bataille describes a return to the animalistic: yet we may refine this view to rather be a removal of the cultural striations imposed upon the otherwise smooth space of psychophysics. We begin to see that trauma is but another deterritorialization; yet it would seem that if this distributed model begins, as it were, from a smooth state, that no further flattening of subjective strata (implied by trauma) could occur. Everything, no matter how *outré* its ramifications or underlying logic (or lack thereof) could be assimilated into this rhizomatic model; all affinity groups would be subject to an association; phlotic resonances could be formed with everything the subject encountered, since the subject would only be the series of those encounters. In other words, if the postmodern subject is always already traumatized, always at odds with himself and his own subjective reality, then there could only be two consequences: a complete inability to perform in any social context (complete social immobility) or else a complete and instant assimilation of all events, freedom from cognitive dissonances (invulnerability from trauma). In the first instance, the subject

rides the line of flight forever; in the second, he returns to it continuously, but unceasingly returns to the molecular, even segmented, without fail.

But both of these outcomes are untrue. Experience tells us that we at least experience the illusion of social compatibility; the incorporation of certain social codes into our own forms of behavior implies that epistemological shifts can and do take place smoothly. We are not ensnared in a web of cognitive dissonances, unable to move, or make sense of the social world around us. Though the postmodern subject may ride closely to the line of flight, it cannot be a life of complete rupture; social interaction is only possible when the subject adopts a stance on the molecular line of some sort of social consensus. As discussed before, the postmodern subject relies upon the construct of social capital—related to the buildup and exchange of identity structures—which implies not only the construction of a binding identity but also the adoption of social codes into a fundamental understanding of reality. Thus, though rupture is possible, necessary, even, to initiate group switching, and inevitable for the postmodern subject, it is not irresolvable or invulnerable to overcoding. Linguistic effects still have their hold, even as we drive closer to unreason; identity and cognitive structures are still necessary. We begin to see that Lyotard's postmodern condition does not spell the end of the subject; it simply means that the subject is continually redefined. The postmodern subject is not continuously in a traumatized state, like some catatonic doughboy, but rather, riding so close to the line of flight, makes an infinite and practically imperceptible series of engagements with it to continuously shift his understanding of the world.

Conversely, the subject does not manage to incorporate all that he encounters over the course of his existence into the narratives of his constituent social identity structures. Just because the subject is a nomad does not guarantee in itself liberation from traumatic experiences; in fact, as we have seen above, the subject's grounding in the molecular line means that rupture is possible. Moreover, the smooth transition between molecular and rupture does not mean that all such epistemological transitions will be seamless. The postmodern subject may perhaps be less vulnerable to certain kinds of trauma, but is by no means invincible.

Therefore, we may advance the possibility of an existence on the molecular, yet one that comes ever closer to the line of rupture. The postmodern condition posits not an existence on this line of rupture entirely (such an existence, however enlightened, usually renders the individual unpalatable for the tastes of the general public) but posits a continuous return to the line of rupture, posits a heightened series of collapsing between the two lines, yet somehow moving along quite smoothly. What we see in the postmodern condition is the ability to acknowledge everything simultaneously as a reality and as a contradiction; nothing seems to surprise anymore. And still we find that certain events—certain points in the line of rupture—manage to disrupt this molecular existence entirely, producing breaks with powerful effects, and making a return to the molecular line impossible, or at the very least difficult to attain.

How can we be sure that this is the case? What we are talking about here isn't trauma as a social event, but rather the lack of a social event, the very lack of a center, a deterritorializing force, that can never be assimilated or overcoded. Within the realm of social interaction, the postmodern subject is capable of comprehending virtually every notion of social value and from these creates a system of exchange. Identity becomes the net sum of all social interactions and codified values, social exchange. Trauma, then, can come from no social exchange; rather, trauma exists as that thing that can never be exchanged, never exposed until reified, and overcoded. Therefore, we seek not a cognitive dissonance, because that would be a relation between two dimensionally compatible epistemes, but rather a state of non-relation, an event that renders any set of vectors insensible; destroying relations by its very non-being, one that cannot imply any possible relations.

Thus, we have a working definition of trauma: it is not a dissonance, nor even dissociation from an event, but a state of non-relations imposed by the war machine. It is the complete devaluing of all the codes of even the postmodern existence. Trauma becomes a destruction of cognitive centers and structures; what happens after trauma is simply the human attempt to reconstitute those centers, sometimes successfully, sometimes not, in a way that addresses the destructive nature of the event. Yet the language adopted by the subject after such a territorialization is forever de-centered, denatured; even as society may provide for him a

reconstitution of those cognitive centers, those centers cannot become cohesive so long as the traumatic event is not reterritorialized. In a broader sense, the traumatized subject remains at a state of mental death until he can forcibly maneuver his mind into the structures of life and imposed order. In terms of the postmodern subject, the traumatic event destroys all codes of existence drawn from the subject's constitutive identity structures; until the trauma itself can be negated (that being of questionable probability), attempts to rebuild those identity structures, the means by which cognition takes place, will fail, fall apart before the force of the war machine. Trauma is not simply deterritorialization: the Internet forces a deterritorialization; postmodernism is a deterritorialization, but at the same time we have shown that this postmodern space is capable of being reterritorialized. Trauma is a deterritorialization so deep that reterritorialization becomes difficult, if not (as we might very well believe) downright impossible. This shouldn't be read as some kind of speciation, a kind of difference-making between the two, or three, or however many different "kinds" of deterritorializations that could be possible; we only know the war machine, and know that there are different possible responses to it.

What, then, should the response to trauma be? Was Foucault correct in his assumption that the language of trauma, that is, madness, was best displayed in art, best heard in literature? The literature of trauma, post-modernism, should not be any literature that develops a self-organizing method, imposing striations and universal rules within its own space; it is reasonable to hypothesize from the thoughts written here that the fiction of postmodernism will be inherently flat, self-defeating, un-ironic, and genuine inasmuch as it is aware of its limitations, always subverting them. We shouldn't focus on the development of a new fiction, but rather the development of fiction in the language of pure existence: that is to say, the language of the mind, such a one that it become impossible to create history again, such a one that creates an infinite return to the line of rupture.