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THE MENDING OF A FRACTURED SELF. ON THE SELF AS A PRODUCED AND SUSTAINED ENTITY

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ABSTRACT. Experientially, we often have a sense of self which is relatively constant across moments in one's personal timeline. There are instances where this sense of self fractures, though, and self-identity becomes difficult to sustain. This essay argues that such fracturing is the result of an interruption in a process of self-narrativization—an interruption which can be mended, at least partially, through creative and communal practices which allow for the possibility of recreating narratives at the site of their failure—and explores the meaning of this fracturing and mending process in terms of colonial violence as an example of a fracturing situation.

Keywords: *critical phenomenology, the self, Levinas, anticolonialism, politics.*

1. Introduction

We often take ourselves for granted. Or rather, we take the fact that we can form a 'self' for granted. The fact that I am currently my*self*, that I am the same *self* that I was ten minutes ago, or last week, or even a decade ago seems to be an uncomplicated affair. If I look at a photo of myself from the past, I can recognize myself, even if I may not want to—from embarrassment over poor fashion choices, for example. Further, that I am a self seems uncontroversial: caught in a pre-critical or pre-phenomenological orientation, my existence is a given and what matters is what happens to my self, not its ontological status.

In this essay, I hope to trouble these ideas. First, I will argue that one's self is not something passively given but is instead something that is *produced*. Work and labor go into creating and sustaining a self, even if this labor is sometimes so light and subterranean that it is barely noticeable. Second, and similarly, I will argue that the continuity of selfhood over time is a complicated affair. Reproducing one's

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self—making it so that one can actually recognize one's image in a photo across vast gaps in time—is a similarly laborious process. Such continuity is not guaranteed: one can fail to sustain one's self.[1] There can be gaps in experience where one looks at an image of the past and fails to *fully* recognize themselves in the image: instead, there is a sense of loss, of disjunction, of anxiety in not being able to dwell within one's self. Similarly, one can avoid producing themselves: they can stay in bed all day, can freeze up from various troubles, and can dissolve themselves in the ether of continuous experience.[2] That is, one can fail to separate themselves from the world, which amounts to the erasure of a self, however temporary that erasure may be. In arguing that the self is an unstable entity across time, my intention is to provide a more accurate picture of what is involved in selfhood. It is a picture which may strain simple binary accounts of selfhood, but which is hopefully closer to the actual experience of being (and failing to be) a self. Thus, this essay aims to be more descriptive than prescriptive: the goal is to show how to make sense of a *produced* selfhood, not to say how one should go about producing a self or what that self

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[1] This isn't to say that one is a *failure* if one *fails* to produce and reproduce a self. It only means that a certain end wasn't achieved. That it wasn't achieved is neither a judgement on the incomplete action nor a prohibition on trying again. This is an *ontological* claim about a certain mode of existence that a self can occupy, not a normative judgement about what a self should be. This is worth clarifying now since in later sections of this essay I will discuss such 'failures' in terms of colonial existence. By calling these 'failures,' I only mean that something which may seem uncontroversial and wholly given over to experience (the presence and persistence of a self) may become troubled and complicated through various experiences: the process of creating/sustaining a self may not succeed. The loop of self (re-)production may short-circuit. The reason for this lack of success is often beyond the scope of one's control and agency. Thus, this is the failure of a *process*—a process that is beyond the agency of any single individual and thus this failure can't be attributed to any single person, let alone the 'self' which fails.

[2] These more quotidian forms of resisting the production of a self don't dissolve the intelligibility of *my* self as a continuous self, though. Spending a lazy Sunday morning in bed is a form of rejecting self-production in the moment but it doesn't constitute a *loss* of one's self in terms of the ability to form narrative continuity across moments in time (a kind of continuity this paper will explore in more depth in Section 3), though repeated 'lazy mornings' that stem from a prolonged state of depression form such a loss. That such narrative continuity can be fractured or ruptured is important to keep in mind, especially in relation to the specificity of colonial fracture discussed below. This is what helps specify the difference between Emmanuel Levinas' theory of ipseity through dwelling and An Yountae's theory of selfhood achieved through the work of passing through what he calls 'the abyss': the latter is a means of working through a failure in the production of a self in the specific context of colonial violence and where any process of forming one's self through separation (as is the case in Levinas' theory) is mediated by one's situatedness in relation to colonization. Other 'failures' are possible that don't necessitate a similar theory of the abyss, but all of which rely on some kind of problem occurring that interrupts the labor of self-production. In this essay we only explore how this can occur in the context of colonization, though.

should look like. This is crucial to keep in mind for later parts of the essay in relation to a discussion of the production of a self through experiences of colonial violence. The self that is produced out of this situation may be a reactionary one that embraces the colonial situation as necessary and even *desirable*. Such outcomes don't contest the argument presented here that a self is produced; such reactionary forms of self-production would need to be analyzed and critiqued separately.

It's important to note that this process of self-production is actually a *process*—that is, it's a continual act of both production and *re*production, one that is mediated both by the social forms of existence that are put at arm's length in the creation of a self and the plenitude of the world that is similarly held in suspension in creating and re-creating a self. Thus Levinas is correct to highlight how selfhood is generated through acts of turning inwards, of creating a split in the world that allows for a self/other distinction—a process that is realized through 'dwelling', as we will explore in more depth shortly. Thus, for Levinas, this 'dwelling' is always mediated by the presence of others, even if it's a process of recoiling from otherness in its entirety. Selfhood is produced though acts such as cooking and eating, giving oneself over to the comforts of sleep, and washing/mending clothes so that one is able to go back into the world the next day—actions that are performed or made possible through the various forms of domestic labor that disproportionately fall on the shoulders of women. This relationship, where a self is made possible through domestic labor that makes dwelling possible, is recognized by Levinas but only in a sexist inversion which essentializes the 'feminine' side of this gendered division of labor.[3]

In highlighting the re/productive aspects of self-production mediated through the presence and labor of various others, Levinas' account of the production of a self—and by extension, the account provided in this essay—links up with various theoretical fields outside of phenomenology which are similarly concerned with the self as a produced entity. Though this essay is largely silent about these connections beyond this paragraph, I hope that it exists as a participant in this ongoing dialogue that is able to show what phenomenology (especially a 'critical phenomenology') is able to contribute. Thus, I see the account of selfhood presented here as a preliminary attempt to create theoretical structures that would allow for connections to be forged between genetic phenomenological accounts of a produced self and non-phenomenological (though not anti-phenomenological) critical theories of self that are currently being developed—for example, the wealth of work that has been done

[3] See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, transl. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 157, where he says that the hospitality of a home is created through the work of "the welcoming one par excellence, welcome in itself—the feminine being."

recently on 'gestational labor'[4] or recent work in Social Reproduction Theory which emphasizes how contemporary self-production is structured by imperialist forms of extraction[5] and capitalist models of reproduction that produce "the chaotic, multiethnic, multigendered, differently abled subject that is the global working class."[6] Here these various connections are only latent, though they form the backdrop and impetus behind attempting to think through this account of self-production and the mending of a fractured self

To help flesh out an account of selfhood which emphasizes the productive element of selfhood—a production process which is always (though not often) subject to failure—this essay will proceed in the following way. Section 2 will examine the ways that a self is *produced* across time and will trouble the idea that a self is simply a given within experience by examining Emmanuel Levinas' theory of the self as a 'hypostasis.' The goal of that section is not to show that one's sense of self is an 'illusion' or that the produced self is a rarity: a self is something structured but also something real and persisting because of this construction. Against a prevailing tendency that sees any presence of discontinuity in selfhood as indicating the illusory nature of a self, this account is one that attempts to capture the seeming stability of one's experience of selfhood as a *stable* self across time while emphasizing how this stability is something *achieved* through various self-constituting actions—just as a building is stable partially because of all the labor put into keeping it stable (by putting in better insulation, for example), one's self is also *made stable* through various actions.[7] Section 3 will begin to look at the difficulties that come into play

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[4] See Sophie Lewis' wonderful, *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family* (New York: Verso, 2019), along with her "Cyborg uterine geography: Complicating 'Care' and Social Reproduction," *Dialogues in Human Geography* 8(3), 2018, 300–316, and "A Comradely Politics of Gestational Work," *Dialogues in Human Geography* 8(3), 2018, 333–339. Along the same lines, both Myra J Hird, "The Corporeal Generosity of Maternity," *Body & Society,* 13(1), 2007, 1–20, and Susan Elizabeth Kelly, "The Maternal-Foetal Interface and Gestational Chimerism: The Emerging Importance of Chimeric Bodies," *Science as Culture,* 21(2), 2012, 37–41, have highlighted how gestational labor is a creative process that features significant interchange between a gestator and a developing fetus—an interchange marked, at least on the purely physical level, not just by an exchange of nutrients, but even by an exchange of genetic material.

[5] See Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2014).

[6] Tithi Bhattacharya, "How Not to Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labor and the Global Working Class," in Tithi Bhattacharya (ed.), *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 74.

[7] This account of selfhood shares a lot in common with and is sympathetic to the account provided by Mariana Ortega in *In-Between: Latina Feminist Phenomenology, Multiplicity, and the Self*, SUNY Press, 2016. See especially 63-84 where her account of a 'multiplicitous self' is developed. Building off of

when trying to *sustain* one's self, difficulties which are most apparent when the means of self-production have been stolen. Accordingly, it will examine the consequences of failing to sustain a self over time in the context of the existential experience of colonialism. The point at which one loses a concrete sense of continuity is a point of crisis. In fracturing, a self is unable to make sense of its cohesion over time, and gaps emerge: a self becomes multiple. After briefly discussing how a self can sustain itself across time through narrative practices (by appealing to Dan Zahavi's idea of a 'narrative self'), this section will focus on experiences of colonialism in An Yountae's work in order to draw out such consequences.

In working through all this, my goal is to produce the beginnings of a theory of the self which recognizes that a self isn't simply a given aspect of experience (instead, its existence is a necessary condition for experience), which is attentive to the troubles that can come about in attempting to produce and reproduce a self, and which takes seriously the fact that we can feel a disunity with our past self/selves by focusing on a situation where this disunity flares up in an intensified form. In some sense, we persist as the same 'object' through time, but phenomenologically we can feel a fracturing or rupture with our previous mode(s) of existence when the process of producing a self is interrupted. In putting these various thinkers and orientations together, this essay can serve as a fecund source for further reflections about the emergence of selfhood, its maintenance and persistence, and the possibility of recomposing a sense of self and identity even in situations of extraordinary violence and trauma—a necessary though by no means sufficient condition for working towards the abolition of such situations.

2. The Phenomenological Production of the Self

One of the most interesting and innovative aspects of Levinas' philosophy is his conviction that selfhood and subjectivity are *events*. The self isn't simply given but is achieved. Labor is needed for selfhood to emerge in a world. Although the overwhelming majority of commentary on Levinas has focused on the transcendental

Lugones' work on selfhood, Ortega argues that she goes too far in saying that one is an entirely *different* self when one "world-travels": there's something poetically useful in talking about existing as a different self when moving between worlds, but Ortega shows that this account is hard to sustain in a literal manner. Ortega's theory of selfhood would be a useful complement to the theory of self presented in this essay, especially given its connections to decolonial theory, but it is not explored simply for considerations of space—doing justice to the subtlety of her account in relation to Lugones, Anzaldúa, and Heidegger would take us far afield.

and ethical dimensions of his theory, much can be gained by turning that focus towards neglected aspects of his work such as his theory of the self and his ontology grounded in the *il y a* (or what he later refers to as 'the elemental').[8] Whereas Levinas' ethical theory has a number of difficult, if not intractable problems (such as the fact that the 'face' which holds us hostage has no positive characteristics and that Levinas considers ethics to be 'first philosophy'),[9] his rich ontological theory holds the potential for developing a phenomenology which resists the sometimes conservative and idealistic character of the field—something which should be important for any attempt to try and create a 'critical phenomenology.' Towards this end, in this section I will develop Levinas' account of selfhood (as a 'hypostasis') and show how hypostasis is achieved through a process of division within and recoiling from existence that creates the space necessary for a self to emerge.

2.1 Hypostasis: The Cleaving of Anonymous Being

Levinas' ontology begins in the *il y a*, the "anonymous rustling of existence."[10] It is anonymous because it lacks unity: to give a proper name to the field of dispersion and multiplicity which objects organize themselves out of is to run the danger of reifying that which precedes reification.[11] For Levinas, before there is some*thing*,

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[8] Levinas first uses '*il y a*' as a technical term on page 20 of *Existence and Existents* (interestingly, he associates it with a feeling of 'horror' at the excessive presence of being). The term is taken up in *Totality and Infinity*, specifically in his chapter on enjoyment as the medium through which objects are encountered. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, transl. Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, 2001 and *Totality and Infinity*, 122–142. Further, this turn towards the ontological aspects of Levinas' work has come out in some recent scholarship, such as Tom Sparrow, *Levinas Unhinged* (Zer0 Books, 2013), though his focus on 'aesthetics as first philosophy' in Levinas' work is very different from my own focus.

[9] The former problem is normally bypassed—at least in attempts to productively use Levinas' work—in order to speak about *specific* groups towards which we have an ethical obligation (such as 'the victimized' or 'the oppressed'). As an example of this, see Enrique Dussel, "'Sensibility' and 'Otherness' in Emmanuel Levinas," *Philosophy Today* 43(2), 1999, 126–134. For the second problem, this is the source of the critique that critical theory makes about phenomenology generally: it grounds itself in a specific element of reality without attending to the mediation of that element. For a contemporary critique along these lines that specifically looks at how Levinas' focus on "ethics as first philosophy" potentially fails to allow for authentic ethical action (in contrast with my sympathetic reading of Levinas in this essay), see Elizabeth Portella, "Mediation and Its Shadow," *Philosophy Today* 63(2), 2019, 427–445.

[10] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 65.

[11] There is thus a difficulty in using *il y a* as a technical term, since it performs this very move: indiscriminate multiplicity is made into *a* thing. This is difficult to avoid—Levinas' use of 'elemental' in his later work

there is simply *some*. This formlessness is uncomfortable and escapes our attention in many everyday moods which have direct (or even indirect) concern for individual objects.[12] The *il y a* only ever appears—but in an appearance that avoids appearing *as* something—in those forms of experience (in moods or affective dispositions) in which we are disjoint with the world: indolence,[13] fatigue,[14] and insomnia.[15]

The latter affective disposition is especially important for Levinas, since it is a way of being in the world prior to 'worldhood' that stands between total immersion in the formlessness of the *il y a* and the radical separation marked by 'hypostasis.' Within insomnia there is 'vigilance,' which is a minimum form of awareness that doesn't collect the 'night' of being into discernible objects (in fact, it is subject to and terrorized by this night): things are hazy in the darkness, especially when we are overcome with an exhaustion that won't yield to rest, to sleep. Objects lack their discrete boundaries. Thus, vigilance is "devoid of objects." It is "an experience of nothingness…as anonymous as the night itself."[16] Put even more startlingly,

> [T]he vigilance of insomnia which keeps our eyes open has no subject. It is the very return of presence into the void left by absence—not the return of

falls into this problem even more directly. Speakers of English could potentially say *there is* (as Lingis' translation does), which both has the advantage that it doesn't artificially inflate the importance of the term (as using a foreign word can sometimes do) and the advantage that, through the italics, it is able to avoid potentially awkward grammatical constructions which crop up from using 'there is' separately from an object. This very italicizing produces the problem at hand though: it makes the *il y a* seem like a singular *thing* rather than a name marking the excess of existence of existents. For a longer meditation on how to get out of a very similar situation (if not the exact same), see Badiou's remarks about the difficulty of designating a 'proper name of being' in Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, transl. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005), 52–59.

[12] That is, the *il y a* exists prior to and makes possible the whole interplay of *Vorhandenheit* and *Zuhandenheit* which makes up the core of Heidegger's theory of worldhood and experience in a world. See §§15–18 of Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, transl. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 95–123.

[13] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 28. Levinas describes indolence as what "makes one prostrate," and "afflicts us with boredom." But he also describes it as the "impossibility of beginning," an important description given his theory of time (which is to say that indolence resists hypostasis, the curling inward that creates subjectivity and thus marks the "pure beginning" of the present (79)). Interestingly, on this same page indolence is also described as "the pleasure of spending the morning in bed," a description which is in tension with Levinas' characterization of enjoyment as the foundation of ipseity in *Totality and Infinity*. See pages 147–151 on "Enjoyment as Separation." Though important, Levinas' account of time is not explored in-depth in this essay.

[14] Ibid., 29–36.

[15] Ibid., 65–67.

[16] Ibid., 65.

> *some thing*, but of a presence; it is the reawakening of the *there is* in the heart of negation. It is an indefectibility of being, where the work of being never lets up; it is its insomnia.[17]

During insomnia our eyes are open, but don't see any *thing*: it gestures towards a genetic zone which precedes and conditions intentional consciousness. But even saying 'our' eyes is saying too much: there is no 'I' in insomnia, just the oppressive weight that creeps up on us when we are unable to tear ourselves away from multiplicity. In our sleepless state, frayed from our fatigue, there is only an experience of existence as a continuous process void of contents. In the absence of existents, existence asserts itself fully. Hence why, at the peak of our inability to sleep, existence itself "reawakens," but reawakens in the formless folds of darkness, far away from the light of intentional consciousness, of Enlightenment, and of the sovereign subject who masters and dominates all objects. Being is always present, even if it fades from our awareness. Insomnia reminds us of this: thus, in vigilance we are reminded of the 'indefectibility' of consciousness, since we can't fully 'defect' from being (or existence): we can't fully depart from being or form a place for ourselves outside of being. In the midst of insomnia, we have no means of separating ourselves. There is no peace (that is, nothing pacific[18]) in insomnia—we are simply immersed in endless oceans of multiplicity.

If we can't depart from being, though, we can pause within it. We can show hesitance or reticence before existence.[19] If the *il y a* "lacks rhythm"[20] (and thus is void of *logos*), by introducing a beat, a separation between sound and silence, a voice which can speak and name (and thus categorize, organize, separate, incorporate, etc.), i.e. a self can be produced. The self comes about through a cleaving of indiscriminate being: it makes a distinction within the formless. This is the process that Levinas calls 'hypostasis.' This process, which is the "advent of a subject"[21] (but also, as a consequence, objects), is like the biological process of invagination, where an embryonic blastula (here standing in as a metaphor for some kind of germ or seed which holds the potential of forming the formless *il y a*) folds inwards and creates the stomach and esophagus, the very organs which stand at the boundary of inside and outside and which take in nutrients in experiences of enjoyment and dwelling.

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[17] Ibid.

[18] See Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 171, where Levinas describes the relationship with the other (that is, the moment in which subjectivity is transcended and shattered) as "fundamentally pacific."

[19] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 67.

[20] Ibid., 66.

[21] Ibid., 67.

We live from "good soup," as Levinas says,[22] and through the enjoyment of eating we literally make food into ourselves: our flesh, our blood, our bones, and all the other elements which form the physical ground of the production of a self are generated through resisting the formlessness of the *il y a*, by giving order to chaos by discriminating between various existents within unbounded existence, and reducing differences to the logic of the same.

In this process of folding inwards, in contraction, the space for selfhood is created. A self, especially a self as a thinking being, is riveted to the place of its emergence. Solitary thought is thoroughly localized and spatialized. Levinas says that "Thought has a point of departure."[23] This point is formed by resisting the encroachment of the night, by "curling up in a corner to sleep" and therefore "abandoning ourselves to a place."[24] If the *il y a* is a name for that horrifying aspect of existence in which we are thoroughly lost without any place in order to understand ourselves, then "Sleep [as the activity which produces hypostasis by overcoming insomnia through positioning oneself] is like entering into contact with the protective forces of a place; to seek after sleep is to gropingly seek after that contact. When one wakes up one finds oneself shut up in one's immobility like an egg in its shell."[25] Sleep comes through submitting to fatigue, though. It comes about by forming a pocket of separation from the torrent of the *il y a* and allowing one's body to take refuge and heal. Place, as the grounding of hypostasis, "is what makes the body the very advent of consciousness…It [the body] is not posited; it is a position. It is not situated in a space given beforehand; it is the irruption in anonymous being of localization itself."[26] Accordingly, right after that quote, Levinas describes the body which is given over to location, to place, as an 'event'—that is, as a rupture within the indiscriminate flow of time which characterizes the *il y a* as a boundless field of existence without existents.

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[22] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 110. Levinas says here that "We live from 'good soup,' air, light, spectacles, work, ideas, sleep [!], etc. … These are not objects of representations. We live from them…. [W]hereas the recourse to the instrument implies finality and indicates a dependence with regard to the other, living from…delineates independence itself, the independence of enjoyment and of its happiness, which is the original pattern of all independence." (The first and last ellipses in this quote are Levinas' own.) This idea that independence is created out of 'living from…' and thus that independence and selfhood are always-already relational should be kept in mind when discussing the fracturing of a self and decolonial theory in Section 3.

[23] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 68.

[24] Ibid., 70.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid., 71.

This process of cleaving the indiscriminate *il y a*, of forming a thinking being thoroughly attached to its body (and thus thoroughly localized), in which we seek refuge and curl inwards in order to protect (and even create) a self, is what Levinas terms hypostasis. He says that this term, 'hypostasis,' has been "taken up" in order to designate the "apparition of the substantive."[27] This term "signifies the suspension of the anonymous *there is*, the apparition of a private domain, of a noun. On the ground of the *there is* a being arises."[28] Here, selfhood isn't a phenomenon to be simply described or some kind of special object to be dissected and studied but is the result of a creative action. Levinas' theory of selfhood neither claims the death of the concept of the self, nor does it pretend that the self is always-already given: a self is something concretely produced. One can fail in the process of becoming a self—things can go wrong. Thus, producing a self is an achievement even if only a partial achievement, since the folding inwards which makes selfhood possible is predicated on the existence of an other and even if this is an end which is usually reached without a problem. A self is a fragile assemblage, a precarious gathering of dispersion in-itself, but because of the seeming immediacy of its production, it is also resilient, like Pele's tears. It is a wager, the result of an act of hope and of faith, and its persistence is therefore possible only through endurance, perseverance, and resilience. But such persistence is also only possible because of acts of care: of letting ourselves heal, sleep, and otherwise nourish our*selves*. A self founds itself, but only within a world to which it is completely given over. Selves are mediated by the surplus of the *il y a* which forms the material basis of self-production. A self is not the basis for 'first philosophy,' nor is it lacking in positive characteristics: a self is a process of fleeing, of evading, of seeking refuge—but refuge in *this* place, with *this* body, and incorporated into a certain sequence of time and history, into a political and social situation.

3. The Interruption of a Produced Self

If the self is something produced, it must have an origin, a moment in time which is indexed to its genesis. Thus, there must exist spans of time which are prior to its advent. And as something continuously remade, there is always the possibility that one's self may dissolve and fail to continue. Thus, Heidegger was correct to situate the existence of the self between its 'thrownness' (it's emergence out of a

[27] Ibid., 82.
[28] Ibid., 82–83.

time that precedes it) and its projective capacities, its irreducible futurity.[29] But as an event, the production of a self occurs within a present moment which is not reducible to either the past or the future and which exists as an irruption within the flow of time—this is one of the crucial things we gain from Levinas' account of the self.[30] Given the instantaneous character of the present, the continuity of the self is contingently given. If the previous section was concerned with the evental production of a self, this section will investigate what follows from the interruption of this production process. It will examine how a self can become fractured, perhaps even beyond the point of recognition. Various situated experiences can split a self into multiple temporal parts, especially those experiences marked by trauma. This possibility of fracturing makes a self a curious kind of existent: it can persist across time without being identical to itself, but also can marked by temporal discontinuity *despite* apparent identity (that is, I may be the same 'thing' at different points in time, but may not feel that I am the same *self,* while still recognizing those previous selves as *my* selves). In this section, I attempt to bring out the strangeness of the existence of a fractured self and how such a self can nevertheless persist across temporal disjunctions. Working out the full logic of such an existence is beyond the scope of this paper. Here I only aim to lay a foundation for future attempts to think through fracturing and self-reconstruction. A fuller account would demand an analysis of fracturing in more diverse situations and a genetic account of the production of fracturing—both of which would be useful in attempting to create a general logic of fracturing but which cannot be pursued here.

3.1 The Fracturing of the Self: Abyss Walking and Narrative Reconstruction

Earlier, I described the failure of self-production as a 'short-circuiting.'[31] This description makes sense when describing a self at the level of its production—where the self curls away from the *il y a* in an act of hypostasis—since the dissolution of a self here tends to be momentary. The gap fails to be closed or completed, one is

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[29] In *Being and Time*, the former is discussed in §38 (pages 219–224) and the latter is discussed in §53 (pages 304–311).

[30] Although I have attempted to highlight the evental character of the self—that is, both its quality of marking a surplus within the flow of time and its existence as a division between the past and the future which is irreducible to either—in my presentation of Levinas' theory of hypostasis, I haven't been able to dive directly into his account of the temporality of a self. For more on Levinas' account of the temporality, see *Existence and Existents*, 85–96 and Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, transl. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987).

[31] See note 1.

confronted with indeterminate existence in bouts of insomnia, and the subject/object distinction plays no phenomenological role. This can be a horrible experience, of course, but it is very different than the kind of experience that comes from the failure of sustaining a self across time: this kind of failure is not characterized by a momentary blurring of ontological boundaries, but by the inability to make sense of oneself experientially. That is, this failure is the result of an inability to make *narrative* sense out of one's self-continuity across time. More than a short-circuit, this narrative inability would be better described as a *fracturing* of a self.

There are at least two alternatives to this term 'fracturing,' both of which I find inadequate. The first is the language of a 'split' subject, which has a long history within theory and philosophy (from the theme of recognition that plays out in Hegel's famous chapter on 'Lordship and Bondage,' to the Lacanian emphasis on the barred subject created through its fantasy, and to the Maoist focus on dialectical reason as the tracing of a "one becoming two"). Although this term is very close to fracture, I prefer the latter since it gets closer to the phenomenological experience of the narrative failure I'm interested in, since a fracture can be either minor or severe. A 'hairline' fracture may cause serious problems in the future, but can go unnoticed in the present (for example, a narrative gap in experience may exist on the margins of one's awareness, but can be avoided for long periods of time—I can overwork, busy myself with small tasks, suddenly move to a new town, engage in various forms of risky but exciting behavior, etc. all to avoid being confronted with the need to coherently narrate oneself).

This brings us close to the second term: 'shattering.' While this term emphasizes the violence that may go into the failure of self-narration, to say that a self is 'shattered' indicates that it might not be possible to repair or reconstruct such a self or even create a new self. This leads to a kind of fatalism which I find neither useful nor accurate: even if it were true in some sense, it doesn't seem useful to attempt to live with the recognition of that truth. But it also doesn't seem true. People can tend to themselves in a manner that allows for the narrative process to overcome the violence of discontinuity. Although one could argue that this new narrative process is 'fictional' in a pejorative sense (that is, the 'narration' is just covering over the real fact of discontinuity), I think this argument would miss the lived content of this experience, where people *do* feel like they've recovered from (or at least learned to live with) prior events of violence and trauma. This nihilism about creating a self in the face of extreme violence and the erasure of memory is a kind of resignation when resilience is most needed. Speaking of a 'fracture,' on the other hand, indicates the potential for healing and repair (like the mending of a fractured, rather than shattered, bone) even if what is produced in the process of healing is different than what existed before the fracture.

To exist across time, a self needs to be able to sustain and reproduce itself. One needs to be able to present a coherent picture of themselves to help make sense of how they are the *same* self despite so many apparent differences. I can potentially make sense of myself as being the *same* self in the present as I was when I was a child by showing how there is a meaningful, expressible continuity between those two parts of myself.[32] Even if there are seemingly major changes to the status of one's self, as long as those changes can be made to cohere through common practices and forms of narration the self can successfully *endure* or successfully hold the immense void of the *il y a* at bay for long enough that these various temporal slices can be said to exist for the *same* self. Thus, even if there actually *are* gaps in my existence as a self (as may be the case if we take Levinas' account far enough, where every time one falls prey to bouts of insomnia and then curls inside themselves enough to finally fall asleep a *new self* is produced), phenomenologically these ruptures in continuity aren't enough for there to be a rupture in the experience of being a single self.[33] This 'smoothing' of experiential/temporal gaps could be likened to the way that visual representation similarly smooths over gaps in the perceptual field in order to present something coherent.[34]

The idea that a produced self can persist through the work of memory and self-narration is inspired by Dan Zahavi's account of continuity. He claims that for an account of the self as existing across time to be successful, it needs to be able to show how "successive phases of consciousness must somehow be united experientially" with the "decisive challenge" of "account[ing] for this temporal binding without giving

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[32] A good essay that links up this narrative element that is constitutive for the persistence of a self across time and Levinas' reflections on the ethical dimensions of 'the face' is John E. Drabinski, "Incarnate Historiography and the Politics of Our Faces," in S. West Gurley and Geoff Pfeifer (eds.), *Phenomenology and the Political* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 101–116.

[33] This may be part of the reason that Josh Parsons, "A Phenomenological Argument for Stage Theory," *Analysis* 75(2), April 2015, 237–242, argues that 'stage theory' (a theory of temporal continuity prevalent in analytic theories of time) somewhat naturally helps make sense of one's experience of existing across time. Though this argument isn't really phenomenological in the sense spoken of throughout this essay (it takes 'phenomenology' to be roughly equivalent to 'experiential') and is rather surface level (it relies on arguments premised on how some experience *feels* at some given present moment—thus, it's more about intuition than anything else), the article does give some basis for beginning to think through what a robust phenomenological account of the self and its temporal parts may be.

[34] Lots of research has emerged on the way that our visual and cognitive faculties 'omit' pieces of experiential data that prevent one from being able to picture the world in a coherent way. This biological process of omission is what helps explain many optical illusions. For one article explaining some of the relevant details of this phenomenon, see Chou P. Hung, Benjamin M. Ramsden, and Anna Wang Roe, "A Functional Circuitry for Edge-Induced Brightness Perception," *Nature Neuroscience,* 10, September 2007, 1185–1190.

rise to an infinite regress, that is, without having to posit yet another temporally extended consciousness whose task is to unify the first-order consciousness, and so forth ad infinitum."[35] To avoid such a regress, an account of the continuity of a self across time needs to be able to think about how this continuity is *generated* out of a self immanently, rather than being established and guaranteed by something existing outside of a self. Zahavi proposes that such a unity comes about through a common experience of time, in which unity is 'woven' rather than being pre-given.[36] Zahavi's theory of selfhood as an 'experiential self' is grounded in a conception of a self as "the very subjectivity of experience."[37] The self is that which is able to have a standpoint, that which is the condition of possibility for experience, but also that which ties together various experiences across assembled slices of time.

Zahavi's self, similarly to Levinas', isn't simply a container for experiences: a self is produced by actively weaving together various experiences, by creating a narrative for one's self which can help tie together these disparate threads. The self *produces* itself by recoiling from the *il y a*; the self *sustains* itself by making this continued recoiling (which makes experience possible) intelligible and meaningful.[38] A self is produced through the labor of separation; a self is reproduced *for that self* through the labor of narrativization, of finding ways to chain together various temporal chunks in a way that is meaningful to the self which they partially compose. Often this is an uncomplicated affair and occurs in the background of conscious thought: since there is nothing disturbing the narrative, it's easy in an everyday setting to chain together myself-in-the-morning and myself-at-night, for example. But sometimes this labor of reproducing a self is difficult; it can be a struggle and the process often involves invention and creativity in laboring to chain together experiences that seem wholly disparate. When this process of chaining together experiences is unsuccessful,

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[35] Dan Zahavi, "The Experiential Self: Objections and Clarifications," in Mark Siderits, Evan Thompson, and Dan Zahavi (eds.), *Self, No Self?: Perspectives from Analytical, Phenomenological, and Indian Traditions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 72. The reason that Zahavi relies on the 'unity of experience,' I believe, is that the opposite thesis quickly runs into problems. If there could be "successive phases *of* consciousness" without there being some form of unity which is experiencing those phases, it's difficult to see how these phases could be *of* consciousness. That is, without the unity, how could these be phases be *successive*—what transcendental rule would bind and ensure their progression?

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid., 60

[38] Here it's useful to recall that this distinction between the production of a self as a founding moment of autonomous existence and the self's reproduction across time is a somewhat artificial distinction. A self is likely never fully generated in this kind of sovereign manner: this production is always-already a *re*production. I have kept this language because attending carefully to the roles of production and reproduction in the generation/maintenance of the self would take me outside the scope of this essay.

especially unsuccessful in a way that is *meaningful* to the self which is interrupted in its persistence—there is a fracturing of the self. In such a circumstance, a self becomes discontinuous and discrete, even if these 'jumps' in continuity still belong to the same person: the self-identity of a (singular) person becomes multiple.

This attempt to trace the consequences of a self's fracturing (both the conditions that make the fracture possible and the actions that can be taken to attempt to mend the damage that's been done, without the fantasy of erasure) is undertaken in An Yountae's *The Decolonial Abyss*. Specifically, he is interested in tracing the 'abyssal' elements that exist in the space created by the failure of produce a self, especially when this failure is the product of colonial forms of violence. This 'abyss' isn't a zone of non-existence (a void) but is instead a name for the process that one undergoes in working through the diverse moments of self-fracturing. The abyss is a movement "from loss to possibility, from finitude to infinity."[39] Thus, the abyss is the name for the well of potential that exists for overcoming the gap produced in the failure of self-production: the abyss is the name for the labor involved in healing a fractured self. And by focusing on the abyss as a particular kind of fracturing indexed to colonial violence, An presents his project as one which hopes to "explore the possibility of reconstructing the fragmented sense of the self after traumatic ruins."[40]

The abyss is a common figure in decolonial literature: as a symbol of painful passage, it highlights both the work that goes into creating a self in the face of the denial of one's humanity and the literal 'middle passage' of the Atlantic slave trade which produced and continues to produce the contemporary world. The mutual recognition of having a shared history in being forced through the middle passage—or having one's ancestors forced through—despite the incredible violence involved, creates the possibility of generating selves out of collective trauma, the trauma of the denial and erasure of both the collective history and the community ties that would allow one to get enough traction to create a self through narration. As Édouard Glissant (a constant source of inspiration for An) put it,

> Experience of the abyss lies inside and outside the abyss. The torment of those who never escaped it: straight from the belly of the slave ship into the violet belly of the ocean depths they went. But their ordeal did not die; it quickened into this continuous/discontinuous thing: the panic of the new

[39] An Yountae, *The Decolonial Abyss: Mysticism and Cosmopolitics from the Ruins* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 10–11.

[40] Ibid., 13.

> land, the haunting of the former land, finally the alliance with the imposed land, suffered and redeemed. The unconscious memory of the abyss served as the alluvium for these metamorphoses. The populations that then formed, despite having forgotten the chasm, despite being unable to imagine the passion of those who foundered there, nonetheless wove this sail (a veil).[41]

An sees his own work as a response to this notion of the middle passage. In response to this excerpt from Glissant, he asks "how is selfhood possible for a colonized subject whose very horizon of existence is breached by the ongoing effects of 'coloniality'? What happens when the abyss is not merely a metaphysical figure but a social, historical, and political one that emerges from the terrain marked by coloniality?"[42] The colonial self is possible precisely because the abyss is something materially produced: as the name for a kind of activity, the decolonial abyss is the process by which a colonial subject—whose selfhood has been intentionally obliterated by acts of violence, suffered both by individuals and communities, at the level of physical pain and historical trauma—is able to produce a self through creative actions which make self-narration possible— even through the rupture of trauma and across the gulfs of experience that such trauma can produce.

This task is impossible within the parameters of the life-world of the colonized since it involves creation *ex nihilo*, a creation out of the nothingness of a social location which isn't afforded dignity or ontological weight and out of the emptiness emerging from obliterated collective memories. This is why the abyss is generative and fecund: a "womb abyss."[43] The abyss, in spite of the violence of its production, is a creative zone which allows for the generation of existents—or rather, a reconfiguration of the givenness of existents, a reshaping of the sedimentation which characterizes how they appear in their seeming immediacy—that is seemingly impossible within the boundaries of the contemporary world.[44] Thus, creative labor that begins from the position of living in the abyss, and which makes such a life possible, draws from the surplus of existence over any instance of the world (as the presented totality of

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[41] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, transl. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 7.

[42] An, *The Decolonial Abyss*, 13.

[43] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 8.

[44] I believe that An's notion of 'world' is intentionally underdetermined here. When I say that the abyss marks a zone that allows for the impossible to emerge in a world, I mean that both at the 'local' and 'global' levels. That is, this could be an impossibility within the world of contemporary capitalist and imperialist relations (the 'impossibility' of creating an end to such systems at the level of the global) or the impossibility of rebuilding a self after traumatic fracturing (which is something seemingly impossible within the boundaries of a world realized at a local level).

existents) and forges new worlds. The existents given through a specific organization of this void are reformed in the context of colonial self-reconstruction by passing through an abyssal state—a reformation made possible because any given world is only one among many (the current world is always a contingent actuality)—in order to create new possibilities for existing and relating. This is an act of hypostasis, but one that involves an inward-folding conditioned by the impossibility of simply 'dwelling' since the wounds of colonial self-fracturing mediate any produced ipseity.

This curious mix of fatality and possibility characterizes the experience of passing through the abyss. It's a form of existential ambiguity that moves between symbolic and historico-material zones, "Loss haunts the horizon of life just as…the ocean is marked with balls and chains (now gone green) that weighed down the slaves thrown into the water."[45] An sees the abyss as more than just a kind of personal passage through an individualized fracturing: it is also the historical and political site which can make such fracturing a feature of a group-identity. The abyss isn't necessarily attached to a single life-history but exists "as a symptom of the loss of historical and politico-economic ground within the (colonial) context of oppression."[46] As such, this form of fracturing can't be resolved through individual action. To mend a collective fracturing, collective actions are needed, from the large-scale redistribution of land, resources, and political power back to the colonized, to the acts of care needed to support and rebuild senses of communal narrative continuity. This act of passing through the abyss is not a solitary endeavor according to An: it is a *colonial* abyss, rather than a *personal* abyss. The narrative work involved is thus one of creating collective images which can help create logical continuity for the colonized and can help create space for asserting their existence and persistence in a global situation which continually denies or obscures such an existence. (Thus, beyond the creation of concepts, the demolition of various modes of thinking is necessary to make sure

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[45] An, *The Decolonial Abyss*, 89. I'm somewhat wary of An and Glissant's use of images of slaves being thrown overboard and drowned—wary, because it comes across as a metaphor or 'mere' literary image that detracts from the real material violence that occurred and continues to occur. It's difficult to talk about such issues without doing symbolic violence to those that are being spoken about though, since the slaves in question have been either erased from history in their particularity or such presence is given over to what can be said in the account books of slaveholders. The very interiority of such slaves is lost and invoking such interiority in a literary style can also be a form of violence. On this difficulty, see Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12(2), June 2008, 1–14.

[46] An, *The Decolonial Abyss*, 92. This form of collective 'fracturing,' which exists partially because of outright violence, partially because of the erasure of a shared history, and partially because of the non-existence of epistemic resources that could help make sense of the specificity of the situation of colonialism is likely an instance of 'hermeneutical injustice'. See Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power & the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

that such concepts aren't usurped and distorted by current colonial and imperial powers. This work needs to be pursued alongside and within land-back movements, rather than in opposition to them as is sometimes argued.[47]) An, in this vein, points towards the importance of the image of the shoreline in Caribbean attempts to make narrative sense out of the situation of coloniality. The shoreline is a point of passage, a liminal zone between the sea and the land, although the shore signifies (and thus its presence *doesn't allow for forgetting*) the violence of the middle passage since "new history is to be born at the very point where [the ocean's] thin line of demarcation meets the land, the rugged soil of history, just as the end of the ocean marks the beginning of land."[48] Such metaphorical descriptions are essential for mending the kind of collective fracturing that results from colonialism since they create shared discursive norms that make such fracturing intelligible and help make the self that emerges out of this fracturing into a source of meaning-making: these metaphors make the unspeakable into something speakable and thus something *communicable intersubjectively*.

Learning to narrativize events that rupture one's self understanding is crucial for mending such fractures. As Susan Brison puts it, "Piecing together a dismembered self seems to require a process of remembering in which speech and affect converge…[since] *saying* something about a traumatic memory *does* something to it."[49] Nomination is a crucial step of mending a fractured self—the act of naming brings into the open that which previously existed *under* the horizon of intentionality. It makes present-to-hand what was previously only ready-to-hand and thus makes a traumatic event into something which can be affected rather than something which only affects. An hints towards this same phenomenon when he says, speaking metaphorically about the process of repairing a broken vase, "the gathering of the broken pieces is a work of love that, at the same time, reveals the pain of its

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[47] This focus on epistemic reconstruction both *instead of* and *in opposition* to land-back initiatives is present in much of Walter Mignolo's work on 'decoloniality'. He says that "The goal [for decoloniality given the state of the world post-9/11] was no longer to 'take hold of the state' but to engage in epistemic and subjective reconstitution". It's important to note that Mignolo says 'no longer…' rather than 'no longer just…' See Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 120.

[48] An, *The Decolonial Abyss*, 94. For another attempt to think through the liminality of the shoreline (or more specifically the 'swash zone') in relation to practices of whaling, commodity food production, gender relations, and human/non-human animal relations, see Russell Fielding, "The Liminal Coastline in the Life of a Whale: Transition, Identity, and Food-Production in the Eastern Caribbean," *Geoforum,* 54, 2014, 10–16.

[49] Susan J. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 56.

scars."[50] This is what gives the abyss, as the space one passes through in attempting to mend a fragmented self "after traumatic ruins," a dialectical character, in the classical sense of a 'negation of the negation.' As An says, "Negation is the movement of crossing or passing through the abyss. Negation means first negating the self. Then it also signifies negating [the act of][51] negation, which points to the act of renunciation, an acceptance of loss that would, paradoxically, defy loss and defeat as the perpetual condition of existence"[52] A self is able to 'close the circuit' of its continuing production after its interruption through acts of violence, by negating such forms of violence and dialectically recognizing the reality of colonial trauma while creating epistemological tools that allow for the possibility of moving on from, and thus transforming, such trauma.

How exactly these epistemological tools are created is beyond the scope of this essay—nor is such a process something which could be given in advance anyway. There is no blueprint for overcoming the negativity which prevents a self from continuing. In this essay, I have gestured to how this works in cases of colonial trauma but it is

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[50] An, *The Decolonial Abyss*, 14. This is a reference to and commentary on Derek Walcott's essay "The Antilles: Fragments [!] of Epic Memory" where he states "Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of its original shape. It is such a love that reassembles our African and Asiatic fragments, the cracked heirloom whose restoration shows its white scars. This gathering of broken pieces is the care and pain of the Antilles, and if the pieces are disparate, ill-fitting, they contain more pain than their original sculpture, those icons and sacred vessels taken for granted in their ancestral places. Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent." A beautiful example of the kind of practices of mending that both An and Glissant are gesturing towards. See Derek Walcott, "The Antilles, Fragments of Epic Memory: The 1992 Nobel Lecture," *World Literature Today* 67(2), 1993, 261–267.

[51] This insertion is made to help clarify the dialectical structure at work in this process of 'double negation.' Although it's a common summary of dialectical logic, "negating negation" means nothing. At most, it would indicate a pure positivity void of any trace of the movement of negativity, which is directly opposed to dialectical forms of thinking. Negation isn't negated in a dialectical process, but the act or structure which produces the negation is what is negated: this is why what is negated is the whole of the structure of capital in the dialectic of history and why, in An's example, the traumatic encounter or situation which negates the self (which fractures or dissolves the self, which stops the self's process of production) is what is negated. The reason that it's said that this negation is 'sublated' is because the thing which is negated in a dialectical process isn't erased (as one pretends while acting in bad faith) but is transformed by being put into a different relation to the relevant totality which grounds it. Hence, the impact of colonial trauma, which makes it impossible within a given situation to harness the narrative tools necessary to allow for a self to persist, is transformed into something intelligible through creative acts of nomination and collective acts of mourning which allow for the possibility of living—fully living—through the practical recognition of a traumatic event or series of events.

[52] An, *The Decolonial Abyss*, 81.

true for other forms of trauma too. Even the means of mending colonial forms of fracture is multiple: what works for Venezuelans will not necessarily work for Cubans, nor will it necessarily work for the indigenous populations of the U.S. or Israel as sites of settler-colonialism. Selves are produced differently in different situations: the work of curling away from the *il y a* takes many different forms and the ontological excess of the *il y a* allows for it to be presented (and thus rejected) in numerous ways. This is part of why the work of sustaining a self can be so difficult. Even such 'normal' cases as resting at home in order to feel whole again are propped up by whole systems of gendered and racialized (re)productive labor, along with whole networks of service providers that help to fill the instantaneous gaps of self-production (or at least make their failures less noticeable). Dwelling is also multiple. But here I have at least shown that the self is something produced and that its persistence is not guaranteed. When there is a failure in the process of self-production, one way of rectifying this failure is through creative acts which allow for acts of narration to continue. These acts of narration allow for a self to begin making sense of itself across instances of disunity: to make sense out of seemingly contradictory statements such as "I can no longer recognize myself as the self that once experienced/believed/felt X, but I still recognize that I am that person." Through the kind of logic presented here, there is at least the beginnings of a general theory of how a self can come into being, fracture or dissolve, and re-emerge as a being able to recognize itself in crossing an ontological gap—in fact, the act of crossing that gap (and building the structures needed in order for such) is precisely what makes such recognition possible.

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