

## **The Reality of the Unmediated: Traumatic and Mystical Experience**

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In an effort to situate and locate the innumerable traumas that are inflicted upon human lives, the field of trauma studies continually confronts the unassailable. This delimits the very possibility of a precise, uncontested definition of ‘trauma,’ which is why Caruth suggests, trauma ‘cannot be defined either by the event itself [...] nor can it be defined in terms of a *distortion* of the event’ (1995, p.4).<sup>1</sup> Although trauma is inextricably tied to an event it cannot be solely defined by it, which leads Caruth to label trauma an ‘unclaimed experience’ (1996, p.1). In other words, trauma is a missed experience that is belatedly and repeatedly returned to the subject without his or her control of it. As such, prior linguistic and conceptual frameworks do not appear to mediate traumatic experiences. In fact, trauma overwhelms all contextual interpreting apparatus.

This characterization of trauma as an unmediated experience has led several scholars to criticize trauma studies (Leys, 2000, pp.266-297). Commenting on the nature of trauma, Foster, an art historian criticizes the establishing of trauma studies as a meta-discourse that, as he writes, ‘has absolute authority, for one cannot challenge the trauma of another [for] [*i*]n *trauma discourse ... the subject is evacuated and elevated at once*’ (1996, p.168).

Since traumatic experiences are directly purported to be an encounter with the real, they have a highly contested political and moral nature, which makes a neutral and ‘objective’ discussion of the mediation or non-mediation simply impossible. If the unmediated nature of traumatic experience is openly questioned, then a dismissal of the significance of the

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<sup>1</sup> All emphases are rendered as in original unless otherwise stated.

claimed experience easily follows. Subsequently, when trauma is interpreted like any other mediated experience, its intangible qualities are attenuated, resulting in the discountenance of the seriousness of the recovery process. I examine, therefore, an analogous debate over the possibility of unmediated experience in religious studies, where a protracted debate about the nature of mystical experience has generated much literature.

The basic descriptions of mystical experience and traumatic experience coalesce at many points. Both experiences, as they are described by mystics and trauma sufferers, are marked by loss and absence, intensity of passion that results in the crossing over of pain and pleasure, fixation with an image or event and passivity of the subject in the experience. They are so similar that David Aberbach argues that mysticism is indeed the sublimation of trauma (1989, pp.83-109). Although there is limited research on the parallels between traumatic and mystical experience, there is no research that explores the seemingly unmediated encounters with reality that both share.

In this paper, I review the recent debate over the (un)meditated nature of mystical experience by discussing the positions of its chief representatives: Forman who argues that mystical experience is essential and unmediated; and Katz who advocates that mystical experience is mediated and dependant on socio-linguistic contexts. Instead of finding a point of mediation, I therefore advocate a repositioning of the debate through the examination of de Certeau's characterization of mysticism. Through his appreciation of mysticism as a state of subjectivation, de Certeau avoids the question of unmediated experiences, instead interpreting mystical experience as a lived, embodied experience that exists only in community. Drawing conclusions from the mystical debate, I argue that traumatic experience must not be isolated from the community in which it is inflicted and suffered. Whether or not these extreme experiences are meditated or unmediated, it is only through community that mystical and

traumatic experiences gain significance or even begin to make sense.

## **Mediated and Unmediated Characterizations of Mysticism**

### *Mediated Mysticism*

Katz's most developed version of his contextualist theory appears in his 1978 work 'Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism'. In this essay Katz seeks to underscore the particular details of individual mystical contexts, dismissing the possibility that mystical experiences are unmediated encounters with reality. He states that '[t]here are *NO* pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences. Neither mystical nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication [...] that they are unmediated' (1978, p.26). This assumption dramatically alters the study of mysticism, in that there is no longer *a* mysticism but only individual mysticisms corresponding to different religious traditions and sub-traditions. Unfortunately, Katz never explicitly indicates what he means by (un)mediated, opting instead to produce examples of linguistic and conceptual mediating frameworks that shape mystical experiences—e.g. cultural, doctrinal, and literary systems.

Since 'mysticism' is no longer an exceptional experience but mediated like other ordinary experiences, Katz avers that the mystical experience is 'over-determined by its socio-religious milieu... [such that] the mystic brings to his experience a world of concepts, images, symbols and values which shape as well as colour the experience he eventually and actually has' (1978, p.46). To illustrate this, Katz selects an example from perceptual psychology, where what the subject 'sees' does not correspond to the reality he empirically sees, but is supplanted by previous knowledge. He cites Monet's painting of Rouen cathedral, where one observes how Monet's prior knowledge that Rouen was a Gothic cathedral caused him to paint Gothic arches, when in actual fact, the cathedral has Romanesque arches (1978, p.30).<sup>2</sup> According to Katz, this example is symmetrical to the manner

<sup>2</sup>As many scholars have underscored, in the text, Katz mistakenly refers to Manet's painting of Notre Dame, when the picture he means is really means is Monet's painting of Rouen cathedral.

in which mystical experiences are mediated, since all experience is mediated in the same fashion, although with divergent contexts. That is not to say that Monet's experience of painting is indeed a mystical experience. This is where Katz's theory of mysticism tends to self-destruct. If all experiences are mediated through the same process, what makes one experience a mystical experience and another a 'painting experience'? It seems at this point that Katz has dispensed with mystical experience altogether.

For Katz, mediation takes place on two levels: linguistic and doctrinal. With regard to the former, Katz makes two important points. First, when mystics describe their experience, their choice of words is not merely descriptive but also prescriptive. When mystics use words such as 'God', 'Allah', 'Brahman', *nirvāna*, etc., they do not function simply as names that arbitrarily refer to some underlying common reality. Rather, each word carries the prescriptive meaning that the larger language-using community attributes to this entity.

Second, Katz dismisses the notion that mystical speech is necessarily paradoxical and ineffable. He contends that this notion is self-refuting and only leads to confusion. If mystics only resorted to language for want of anything better, then why would they have put so much faith in language, leaving extensive bodies of work behind? Without claims to ineffability, mystical language does not escape the mediating capacity of language.

On a doctrinal level, Katz rejects the notion that the mystic colludes in encapsulating his or her ineffable and transcendent experience in the conceptual apparatus of his or her tradition *ex post facto*, suggesting instead that meditation occurs through the entire span of the mystic's life. From the time that he or she is a child, the mystic is imbued with a particular religious worldview that shapes the mystical experience even before one occurs. As a contextualist, Katz argues it is meaningless and vacuous to attempt to separate an experience from its mediating frameworks.

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*Unmediated Mysticism*

Forman, discontent with Katz's prescriptive account of mysticism, argues that certain mystical experiences are, in fact, unmediated. Although he agrees that Katz's theory is effective to an extent, Forman claims that certain strains of mysticism are able to produce an unmediated experience that he calls a 'pure consciousness event.' Forman, who claims to have experienced one, defines the pure consciousness event as 'a transient phenomenon during which the subject remains conscious (wakeful, alert—not sleeping or unconscious) yet devoid of all mental content' (1993, p.708). If such an event does occur, its unmediated nature is evident through its lack of content; however, this is just the point in question. Katz's beginning assumption that there are 'no pure experiences' clearly discounts Forman's pure consciousness event. I shall address the larger question of methodology and definition later.

Exposing Katz's underlying principle, Forman charges him with insufficiently explicating what mediation entails, and especially how mystical experience is mediated, since Forman delimits mysticism as *sui generis*. In his 1999, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*, Forman articulates a model of mysticism that includes unmediated mystical experiences. Since unmediated experiences are not common, acceptance of such experiences is limited. Through what Forman calls the 'forgetting model,' he describes how the mystic escapes the mediating confines of language.

Forman argues that the forgetting model is found in many mystical texts, but primarily the *Maitrī Upanishad* (300 B.C.E.), Eckhart's sermons (1280-1328 C.E), and the anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing* (1396? C.E.) where the authors employ terms such as 'forgetting', 'unknowing', 'the Cloud of unknowing' and the 'the Cloud of forgetting'. Forman suggests that these terms constitute a negative performative language used by mystics to cleanse or clear the consciousness.<sup>3</sup> Just as certain words inherently

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<sup>3</sup> M. Sells makes a similar point in his 1994, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. As apophatic language has largely been belied (i.e.

perform an action (i.e. ‘I do’ at a wedding ceremony), so too others *un*-perform an action (i.e. ‘I divorce you’). Forman writes, “‘I’m leaving you’ is a *negative performative* [...] it undoes or disconnects something’ (1999, p.98, emphasis original).

In a mystical *de*-performative, the mystic is instructed to ‘restrain the breath’, ‘withdraw the senses’, ‘cease thinking’, ‘forget’, ‘restrain the mind’, or ‘put behind a cloud of forgetting’, all of which are concerned with restraining the mind’s active construction of experience (or *un*-constructing, if you will). (1999, p.99) Mystical language, instead of functioning as a horse pulling a cart, as language does in ordinary usage, operates like a rocket lifting off into space which once out of gravitation releases a space capsule. As long as the capsule (the mystic) is in space it is free from gravity (language mediation), but as soon as it returns it is again under the pull of gravity (language). (1999, pp.99-102)

Once language is again employed post-experientially, the problem of describing the event occurs. Since language was not employed during the event, the mystic must postulate a *via negativa* description of the experience. In fact, for Forman, mystical language is so markedly different from ordinary language that he concludes: ‘there are two or more epistemological modalities being tapped by the mystic, and each of those modes warrants a different kind of epistemological analysis’ (1999, p.106). Consequently, Forman upholds, contrary to Katz, the notion that mystical experiences are ineffable. This opens a ‘crisis of representation,’ for it then becomes impossible to sufficiently express the life-altering experience.

Unfortunately, there is no clear hermeneutic protocol of how to settle the dispute. As such, each party gravitates to those texts that support their position whilst disregarding those texts that cast doubt. Thus it is the initial assumptions and definitions of methodology that dictate the trajectory of

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it still conveys a positive meaning – it is just expressed negatively), Sells argues that unlike apophatic language ‘[a]pophatic *theory* affirms the ultimate ineffability of the transcendent [by] affirm[ing] ineffability without turning back upon the naming used in its own affirmation of ineffability’ (p. 3). This speech is not merely said, but performed.

each position.

By employing two modalities of interpretation, Forman isolates the pure consciousness event, the truest mystical experience, from more banal mystical experiences, which allows him to escape from Katz's prescription. Although this enables him to regain a *sui generis* mysticism, it also has an adverse effect. Through his emphasis on the pure consciousness event, Forman inadvertently disparages mediated mystical experiences. This poses a problem, because the majority of mystics who experience the pure consciousness event are men. Whilst male mystics tend to have non-sensory, apophatic experiences of divine union or enlightenment, Janzen points out that female mystics usually experience intense bodily experiences such as visions, a sense of being in another location, or auditory sensations. Thus by creating a hierarchy of mystical experiences Forman degrades the typical female experience and places the male experience in a position of principle importance. As Brown underscores, there is a similar ranking in trauma studies where what is accepted as trauma tends to be the open and public trauma like war, not the hidden traumas that are inflicted on women such as rape or sexual abuse (1995, pp.100-112).

By now it has become apparent that there is no point of meditation between these two theories. The answer to the question 'are some mystical experiences unmediated?' only reflects the manner in which each position defines mysticism. Since there is no precise, uncontested definition of 'mysticism' each faction simply stipulates an *ad hoc* definition. Thus Samuel Brainard asks: 'if the rules for deciding on a contest are, themselves, included as part of the contest, by what measure do we decide among the participants?' (1996, p.361). Of course, there is no determinate measure and this lack only exacerbates the fragmentation. It is for this reason that I suggest a shift away from the debate over essential mysticism.

### **De Certeau and Mysticism as Subjectivation**

As we have seen, both Katz and Forman reduce mysticism to essential formations that exclude alternatives. In order to explicate a more heterological theory, Goddard suggests a theory that approaches ‘mysticism [...] as an existential practice of subjectivation [that] neither reduc[es] it to its textual forms nor ascrib[es] to it a universal essence.’ de Certeau has explicated such a theory in his ‘Mysticism’, originally an entry in the *Encyclopaedia universalis* (1968). His divergent trajectory is instated by his refusal to essentially define mysticism, though he genealogically traces the provenance of this notion.

Avoiding the isolating effects of Katz and Forman, de Certeau establishes the mystical experience as a social event that ‘subjects’ the mystic—both giving a unique subjectivity whilst producing a ‘language in the body’ (1992, p.13). The mystic’s body is appropriated and incorporated as a point of significance against his or her will, as de Certeau suggests, ‘the event imposes itself’ almost like ‘a gift’ (1992, p.18).

The mystic herself or himself is now a point of meaning for the community at large, but not meaning that is easily grasped. The meaning that he or she signifies is the meaning outside the realm of conceptualization, and yet precisely in the midst of humanity. With his extensive Lacanian training, I would conjecture that de Certeau posits the mystic as a signifier of the real, though he never uses the term. Therefore, de Certeau writes,

The mystic ‘somatizes’, interprets the music of meaning with his or her corporeal repertoire. One not only plays one’s body, one is played by it. ... In this regard, stigmata, visions, and the like reveal and adopt the obscure laws of the body, the extreme notes of a scale never completely enumerated, never entirely domesticated, aroused by the very exigency of which it is sometimes a sign and sometimes a threat. (de Certeau, 1992, p.22)

Like Forman, de Certeau proposes a two-tiered epistemology of mysticism. However, instead of proposing a bifurcation of mystical experience, de Certeau is more generally concerned with knowledge. For him, there are two types of ‘knowledge’: one that is conceptual, easily graspable and another that is simply lived, embodied, that cannot be known without being lived. Mystical experience falls into the latter category. Mystical knowledge can never be possessed or inscribed, but like music it can only be heard and felt. The mystic’s body is plucked like a string of a harp to release the meaning she embodies—a meaning that could be provisionally inscribed, but is only fully present and actual when played. The meaning that he or she embodies is not a meaning that he or she could possess, but is only marked by the absence of his or her knowing.

Furthermore, the mystic’s meaning disrupts the flow of time. Just as music is not heard in a moment, but only in relation to the moments preceding and following, so too, the mystical event requires time to be lived. The mystical experience ‘opens up an itinerary’ and emanates a mystical life ‘when it recovers its roots and experiences its strangeness in ordinary life’ (1992, p.19). Thus the extraordinary experience is reintroduced into quotidian existence. Paradoxically, though the mystical experience occurs only in an instant, it always ‘refers to a history,’ which may have never actually occurred (1992, p.18). According to de Certeau, the mystical ‘history’ is the ‘movement beyond the [singular] event’—a movement ‘already made or yet to be made’ (1992, p.19). Subsequently, the mystical experience is not separable from the life of the mystic. It is always embedded in the trace of a previous experience. The only way to understand the mystical experience is, as de Certeau insists, through the theorization of practice, which requires an imaginative or ‘musical’ interpretation. He writes,

Such an approach involves an attempt to repeat ... [the practice’s] movements ourselves, to follow, though at a

distance, in the footsteps of its workings; it means refusing to equate this thing, which transformed graphs into hieroglyphs as it passed, with an object of knowledge. (de Certeau, 1986, p.83)

One must live the mystical life if one is to understand it. Of course, that such an approach is inextricably imbued with pathos need not discredit it. There are certain types of knowledge that are known only through the living of them. One cannot possibly imagine birth, death, or the thousands of daily experiences in the abstract without having lived them first.

To this end, de Certeau's theorization of mysticism as a dynamic process that does not seek to ground its discourse is, as Marsanne Brammer suggests, not substantive (in terms of nouns-objects), but rather dynamic (in terms of verbs, acts, or practices) (1992, p.27). Subsequently, de Certeau avoids the 'essentializing' of mystical experiences by leaving it in the tension between 'the abnormal, a rhetoric of the strange' and the 'essential [...] that never could be possessed' (1992, p.16).

Forman and Katz's debate over the nature of mysticism, whether it is mediated or unmediated, is a misconstrued debate that only begets specious conclusions. The theorization of mystical experiences must exclude such attempted resolutions and return the mystic to his or her life and community where, as de Certeau suggests, mysticism is embodied. For de Certeau, mysticism is not just a religious entity, but it is an actual manner of thinking and a 'heterogeneous ensemble of discursive and experiential practices' (1992, p.28). In mysticism 'something irreducible nevertheless lingers, upon which reason itself depends—something whose phenomena reason attempts to 'demystify' by displacing its myths, but of which it cannot disinfect a society' (1992, p.24). That which is mystical cannot be explained in non-mystical terms. Mysticism is a lived practice and must be theorized as such. Because mystical knowledge, like traumatic 'knowledge', is characterized by an absence of meaning, a meaning that is still present in the body, it is not easily 'theorize-able.' Neither traumatic experience nor mystical

experience is an empirical entity, but rather a state of subjectivation where the subject is both subjected *to* and the subject *of* its larger community.

### **Implications for Trauma Studies**

Because of similarities between them, there are certain implications from the study of mysticism which can be used in trauma studies. As I suggested earlier, when trauma's unmediated status is discussed and questioned, its social significance is also questioned. Imbued with immense pain and suffering, traumatic experiences hold a space of concern and importance. As such, they are not reducible to other mundane experiences. It is unlikely that the experience of a paper cut or a bad haircut could ever share the magnitude of a true traumatic event. However, does the magnitude of a traumatic experience necessitate that it is an unmediated experience?

Although trauma appears to be an unmediated experience, confirmation of its status cannot be corroborated. Since an uncontested theory of trauma is not available, it follows that a definitive characterization of a traumatic experience is not either. This is not to say that traumatic events are trivial or insignificant. Whether or not the experience escapes the normal mediating frameworks, it remains an experience of immense significance both for the subject and the larger community. It is here that complications occur, for how can one propose to grade or determine a hierarchy of experiences? Can one even speak of 'experiences' as if they were things? Are experiences even comparable with one another? These are crucial questions that demand consideration.

First, as I demonstrated in mystical experiences, when one privileges a certain experience over another there are always consequences. Brown raises a prime example when she underscores the way in which public trauma is privileged over private, thereby degrading woman's traumatic experiences, which tend to be private (1995). Traumatic experience can become a rhetorical tool to gain power and influence. In such a state of

affairs, Foster's criticism of trauma studies is warranted, since the subject who employs such rhetoric banks upon the significance of trauma without having to suffer the actual effects. Trauma becomes established truth, as a way to gain influence. Is there an approach that would allow trauma to be a significant experience without giving it absolute privilege?

Second, speaking of 'experience' as if it were an empirical reality misconstrues the nature of experience. Experience, in its epistemological sense, is variously defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as 'to directly perceive', 'to be conscious of', or 'be aware of.' In all three, what is apparent is a sense of immediacy of each moment of perception. As such, experience does not have a definite meaning, as if it were a conceptual category. If one insists on speaking of 'traumatic experience' as if it were a certain special category of experience, then as Robert Sharf maintains, one 'must construe the term "experience" in referential or ostensive terms' (2000, p.277). He continues, 'to do so is to objectify it, which would seem to undermine its most salient characteristic, namely, its immediacy' (2000, p.277). In other words, traumatic experience cannot have a determinate meaning unless it is rendered an 'object' or a 'thing', but if it is, then 'experience' is unable to work with the immediacy that it requires. Subsequently, the field of trauma studies tends to reduce trauma to a vacuous 'object' of experience when trauma is by no means an actual object.

Since no conclusive adjudication of trauma's mediated status is possible, a reorienting of the debate is warranted. However, as the two complications bear witness, when one refrains from interpreting trauma as an unmediated experience, problems arise. Although the theorization of trauma would be less difficult if it was definitely unmediated, no authoritative characterization or definition is possible. Just like the debate over the nature of mystical experience, the debate over trauma's nature is not resolvable. I suggest, therefore, employing a method similar to de Certeau's in trauma studies, which grounds the theorization of trauma in

life.

Instead of isolating a diaphanous conception of ‘trauma,’ scholars might interpret trauma as a mode of subjectivation. Such a move would ensure that trauma is viewed as a real life practice and not a misconceived metaphysical entity so that ‘trauma’ would cease to exist outside lived experience. Trauma only occurs in the process of subjectivation, where ‘subjects’ gain individuality whilst being made subjects by the rest of the community. Traumatic experience, therefore, is neither mediated nor unmediated; it occurs in the process of life. In other words, though the actual traumatic event may overwhelm the mediating contextual apparatus as it occurs, the event as it is experienced is not separable from the course of the subject’s life. The advantage of viewing trauma as a mode of subjectivation is that the focus is on the context of the subject’s life, allowing the subject to more manifestly integrate the traumatic experience into his or her life.

Since traumatic experiences occur within the course of life, they must be theorized as a life practice—or as Pierre Bourdieu has theorized it, a *habitus* (1977). This would require envisioning trauma not as an isolated event or experience, but as a practice of life—a practice to which all humanity bears witness. Endeavoring not to dismiss the severity of individual traumatic experiences, I suggest that in the aggregate life is traumatic. I am not suggesting that life on an individual basis is continually overwhelming and wounding, but that if one characterized life in all of its manifestations, trauma would be one of its principle properties. As such, each human is confronted with the traumatic nature of life, even if he or she does not directly experience trauma.

Interpreting trauma as a practice requires a dynamic theorization. As Brammer contends, understanding practices requires ‘thinking through [them], as well as [...] thinking *about* them’ (1992, p.36). Trauma is incomprehensible at a purely conceptual level, which requires an embodied

and imagined understanding. Since humanity already witnesses the traumatic nature of life, thinking through individual traumatic experiences is possible to a limited extent through the embodied imagination that feels, sees, and hears. Although it is by no means a pleasant experience, understanding trauma occurs when an individual is willing to relive it through the power of imagination. As such, the theory of trauma is grounded in life, the only place where trauma is observable.

Approaching trauma as a process of subjectivation provides an ideal location that avoids interpreting traumatic experiences as mediated or unmediated. Instead it places trauma in the course of community life where it avoids either extreme. If traumatic experiences were definitively mediated experiences, they could eventually lose their significance, becoming equated with ordinary experiences. If they were definitively unmediated, they could wield a preponderance which one might misuse to procure power and significance. As a practice, this theory of trauma is capable of balancing the two extreme positions.

Presenting trauma as a practice within community is not without its own faults. First, it means that a stable theory of trauma is not possible. Instead, it is always in flux, requiring constant rethinking and rearticulating. Second, understanding trauma becomes a precarious venture, since the subject risks becoming traumatized as well. As Brown asks, ‘How can those of us who work with survivors become, not traumatized by our exposure [...] but heightened in our sensitivity, exquisitely aware of how life needs to be fine-tuned, moved to be the changer and the changed?’ (1995, p.110). Brown suggests that the answer lies in ‘a radical revisioning of our understanding of the human condition’ (1995, p.110). Such revisioning necessitates viewing trauma as a practice in which all humanity plays a part. Theorized as a practice, it becomes possible to alleviate trauma, which allows caring individuals to reduce to impact of the inevitable occurrence of traumatic experience. By envisioning trauma as a theory of subjectivation,

an opportunity for the community to ‘be the changer and the changed’ is opened.

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