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The Trauma of Removal in Mary
Rowlandson's *The Sovereignty and Goodness
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Aaron Graham

Current theorizations of a traumatic experience's construction describe the traumatic event as that which, with unusual force, impinges upon or ruptures a boundary, demarcating either psychological or physical identity. This description of trauma is analogous with the physical process of wounding and derives from the etymology "trauma", from the Greek *τιτρώσκω*: to wound. However, as Judith Butler reminds us, "even the body is not a being but a variable boundary" (171). As such, restricting our consideration of traumatic events to those events that rupture or impinge upon the boundaries of the physical or psychical body is to ignore the larger question of how—as a result of a traumatic event—the boundaries informing one's identity may be brought down entirely. By considering the manner in which identity is constructed and constantly reformed by the ever-shifting boundaries of the temporal and geographical space one occupies, this paper interrogates how

trauma may be constructed as a removal outside the boundaries that inform one's identity.

By considering the structure of Mary Rowlandson's narrative *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* as constructing her traumatic experience as a process of removal, this project seeks to enlarge our understanding of the multiple potential formulations of traumatic experience. Through examining how Mary Rowlandson's traumatic experience becomes encoded in her own narrative account of her captivity, this paper will show the viability of structuring traumatic experience as not only an impingement or wounding, but also as a removal.

The formulation of trauma-as-removal profoundly affects Rowlandson's narrative as her identity becomes continually reconstructed—informed by the ever-shifting temporal and geographical space she occupies. This paper examines her narrative's attempt to codify a stable identity when the boundaries informing and delineating "Self" from "Other" have not merely been impinged upon, but fallen away entirely, thus being replaced by structures that previously signified otherness and alterity.

This paper begins by examining the structure of Rowlandson's narrative as indicative of the traumatic events it contains by considering the series of "Removals" from the socio-political and religious center of Rowlandson's Puritan identity, Lancaster, Massachusetts. I focus on how, during the first half of the narrative, Rowlandson's discourse characterizes the Indians in brutish, inhuman, and often bestial terms in order to establish a strict dichotomy between her captors and her Puritan identity. As will be seen, this strict binary is adopted and acts as a substitute for the binaries of civilization/savage, home/wilderness, and Christian space/Pagan space upon which Rowlandson's Puritan identity had been dependent and which had been lost in her subsequent removal. It is asserted that the vehemence with which Rowlandson demonizes the Indians indicates her traumatic experience by returning to affective intensity of the originary traumatic event—the siege of Lancaster. As Rowlandson is removed further from this center of her Puritan identity, even the binaries she erects to function as a new set of boundaries between her identity and the constructed alterity of her captors deteriorate. Understanding this process as inherently traumatic can help elucidate the manner in which trauma can alter the way in which victims of trauma perceive and construct their own identity.

Throughout Rowlandson's account, there are segments of narrative that periodically appear jarringly disconnected from the text's title, *The Sovereignty*

and Goodness of God. Portions of the narrative detail actions committed by Rowlandson, which one would assume she would omit. This paper argues that these sections are of key importance to analyzing the traumatic status of Rowlandson's "Removal" from Puritan society. Viewing them as Cathy Caruth's theoretical position suggests—as flashbacks to the traumatic events themselves, which have been etched or imprinted on her mind below the level of conscious thought¹—provides a palpable explanation. By this reasoning, Rowlandson cannot help but include the troubling and often damning segments from her narrative, as these experiences have not yet risen entirely to the level of cognitive thought. As such, they cannot be manipulated to the extent that allows for narrative reconstruction or selective omission. By beginning analysis with the attack on Lancaster—and noting how the frequency of these damning asides increase as Rowlandson is moved farther away from Lancaster in the proves of her captivity—these moments are evaluated as narrative markers that are indicative of the progression of Rowlandson's trauma.

Mary Rowlandson's *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* begins to develop the narrative of trauma-as-removal in her initial characterization of the Indian raid on the Puritan settlement of Lancaster. The language of her description begins the narrative and constructs the pervasively traumatic tone of the work, establishing a series of stable, normative identities demarcated by—and anchored in—the geographic boundaries of the Puritan settlement. As the story begins, the traumatic impingement of these boundaries takes center stage. On the first page of her narrative, Rowlandson writes,

On the tenth of February 1675, came the Indians with great numbers upon Lancaster: their first coming was about sunrising; hearing the noise of some guns, we looked out; several houses were burning, and the smoke ascending to Heaven. There were five persons taken in one house; the father, and the mother and a sucking child, they knocked on the head; the other two they took and carried away alive. (167–68)

The essential construction of identity that occurs in the first few pages of the work focuses on establishing a fundamental Puritan basis for Rowlandson's identity, centered in her home in Lancaster. The significance of the traumatic impingement of these boundaries relies a great deal on an othering of the Indian attackers that parallels Rowlandson's description of their penetrating the perimeter of the town.

During the siege of Lancaster, but before the Indians captured her, Rowlandson expressed the traumatic impingement of the Puritan boarders as inextricably tied to her underlying construction of their alterity. Rowlandson writes, "It is a solemn sight to see so many Christians lying in their own blood, some here, and some there, like a company of sheep torn up by wolves, all of them stripped naked by a company of hell-hounds, roaring, singing, ranting, and insulting, as if they would have torn our very hearts out" (169). The binary's basis for Rowlandson's configuration of identity becomes clear by the manner in which she describes the Christians in this scene. The Christians are "lying in their own blood," slaughtered like sheep during the onslaught of ravenous wolves. Her description portrays people who share her familial identity in terms of their victimization by the Other. In the same passage, the Indians' character becomes othered by Rowlandson's use of a metaphor, allowing her to interpret their identity as inhuman. By calling the Indians "a company of hell-hounds" and giving their voices an unearthly, unnatural quality, she further separates the Indian aggressors' identity from that of their Puritan victims. In Rowlandson's description, "roaring, singing, and chanting" become characteristic of the Indians' voices; this depiction assigns it an identity diametrically opposed to the civilized humanity that is represented by the suffering Puritans.

The ahistoricity of Rowlandson's account of the Indian attack and her subsequent captivity further complicates her narrative by further resisting the boundaries imposed, giving the event a historical locus. As we know, and as Rowlandson would have been acutely aware, the assault on Lancaster occurred during the final stages of King Philip's War. Rowlandson elides the backdrop of anxieties and hostilities between the English Puritans and the savage heathens, which frame the narrative's problematic trajectory. The attack itself enters a space of alterity because of its ahistoricity; according to Rowlandson, the assault is not part of an ongoing campaign that included violent and inhumane acts on both sides, but is a singular act of aggression on the part of the violent savages. The notion of alterity as being a space occupied by everything that is not congruent with one's own identity typifies these binary constructions and pervades Rowlandson's account. As her captivity begins, the Indian is vengeful, violent, and diabolical. Conversely, the English Puritan must be civilized, empathetic, forgiving, charitable, pious, patient, loyal, and elect. Removing the Indian's raid on Lancaster from its historical location—in the midst of a war characterized by mutual and reciprocal acts of aggression—Rowlandson reorients the reader by crafting a moral geography controlled by her narrative frame.

To Rowlandson's reader, the Indian assault on Lancaster appears to be a startlingly hostile, unprovoked, and unanswered act of violence which both allows for and justifies Rowlandson's depiction of the Indians' alterity as demonic and reifies her Puritan identity's value.

In addition to establishing the moral geography of her narrative frame, Rowlandson's account of the raid on Lancaster and its bestial description of her soon-to-be-captors needs to be considered as a—perhaps unconscious—memorialization and mythologization of her personal trauma. By beginning her account of Lancaster's siege and her capture with the precise date, circumstances, and time of day the attack was perpetrated, Rowlandson's narrative functions as what theorist Cathy Caruth calls "memorializing the traumatic event"(5). Rowlandson's framing of the Indian attack erects a textual monument to mark both her own capture and the beginning of her removal from Puritan society. Additionally, this constructs a textual headstone for those individuals killed or separated from their families during the siege. This attempt to commemorate the losses that resulted from the Indians' attack on the Puritan settlement is held in tension with Rowlandson's language, which seems intent on transcending the representational boundaries of history and moving into myth.

In her analysis of the representation of historical trauma, Kali Tal suggests that one of the most common ways in which traumatic events are incorporated into conventional historical texts is through the process of "mythologization."² This "works by reducing a traumatic event to a set of standardized narratives turning it from a frightening and uncontrollable event into a contained and predictable narrative"(6). Rowlandson's use of biblical imagery and archetype in the description of the assault in Lancaster begins the process of mythologization in Rowlandson's narrative. The setting of the attack: at sunrise where "several houses were burning, and the smoke ascending to Heaven" reminds her Puritan readers of biblical descriptions of Hell, as opposed to the sleepy Puritan settlement of Lancaster. The shadowy figures of Indians violently murdering nearly everyone in sight, and lighting all the hallmarks of civilization afire with their torches, resonates with demonic intent, rather than reflecting the historical context of the siege—as one in a number of ongoing military skirmishes. Her description of the Puritans as "a company of sheep torn up by wolves" adds to the siege's biblical reference and associates Rowlandson and her people with the sinless, humble flock of God's Elect—eliding the settler's own offensive actions against Indians during King Philip's War. Finally,

Rowlandson's description of the Indians as "a company of hell-hounds" whose "roaring, singing, ranting, and insulting" emphasizes their fiendish intent to vivisect the defenseless Puritans.

Rowlandson describes, in brutal detail, the demonic whirlwind of the Indian hell-hounds rampaging through the defenseless Puritan settlement, raising buildings, and slaughtering men, women, and children without discrimination or affect. However, as the Indians encircle Rowlandson's house and light fire to the dwelling's roof, a startling shift in the narrator's tone calls the reader's attention.

I had often before this said that if the Indian should come, I should choose rather to be killed by them than taken alive, but when it came to the trial, my mind changed. Their glittering weapons so daunted my spirit, that I chose rather to go along with those (as I may say) ravenous beasts, than that moment to end my days; and that I may the better declare what happened to me during that grievous captivity, I shall particularly speak of the several removes we had up and down the wilderness. (169)

As the demonic, lupine Indians are at the threshold of Rowlandson's own house, Rowlandson justifies her decision to be taken prisoner. While her description of the Indians as "ravenous beasts" remains consistent with the discourse of the alterity characteristic of her narrative thus far, her own actions seem to fight against everything the reader has come to know as integral to Puritan identity.

The appearance of ideological dissonance in a narrative told by the survivor of traumatic experience may be indicative of the traumatogenic pathology of the events described. Prior to the assault on Lancaster, Rowlandson believed she would rather be killed by the Indians than taken alive. Though she refers—at this point—to the captivity itself as "grievous," its characterization is dependent on its relation to Puritan life. Therefore, the occurrences that happen in captivity exhibit the opposite characteristics of her life as a free Puritan woman, and wife of the minister. However, the apparent lack of strength demonstrated by Rowlandson's unwillingness to yield her life and apparent preference to risk dishonor at the hands of the demonically portrayed Indians belie a problematic dimension of her narrative. The breakdown of Rowlandson's narrative frame allows for the admission of this essential weakness in character. This is consistent with Caruth's claim that the proximity of a victim to the originary traumatic experience can prevent her restructuring or omitting elements of the traumatic narrative, thus creating a coherent tale (149). For Caruth, a trauma

victim's ability to change her traumatic narrative and "tell a different story" (129) is evidence of her working through the traumatic experience. In Rowlandson's case, this break in her narrative voice—to include the unflatteringly honest description of her decision to live in captivity, rather than forfeit her life at the hands of the Indians—provides evidence for the ongoing traumatogenic status of her capture.

Rowlandson's movement beyond the boundaries of Lancaster in the "First Remove" is representational of the demarcation of the spatial limits of her Puritan identity. Moreover, her removal from the social body of her congregation in Lancaster represents and captures the importance of this traumatic rupture of social identity. Rowlandson details her first remove: "About a mile we went that night, up upon a hill within sight of the town, where they intended to lodge. There was hard by a vacant house (deserted by the English before, for fear of the Indians). I asked them whether I might not lodge in the house that night, to which they answered, 'What, will you love Englishmen still?'" (169). Despite being dislocated from the hub which informs her Puritan identity, Rowlandson remains in sufficient proximity to this cultural nexus, "upon a hill within sight of the town," to feel hopeful that she may spatially redefine her identity and confirm the Indian's alterity. Her request to lodge within the abandoned English house represents an attempt to demarcate a white, Puritan space within Indian captivity. Were Rowlandson's request granted, she would be able to seek refuge inside a structure that possesses the definitive characteristic of being not Indian. Thus, her identity could be temporarily stabilized because the borders of this house mimic those of Lancaster; everything within the house would be safely familiar, and the Indians outside its walls would be othered.

Judith Butler's observation that "the body is not a 'being,' but a variable boundary" (67) shows that Rowlandson's plea to live in the abandoned English house is an attempt to reaffirm her Puritan identity by resituating herself within the boundaries of her English ancestry. This attempt is aided by reinscribing the Indians' barbarity: placing them in diametric opposition to English civilization, as symbolized by the specific "English" dwelling. The Indians' response to her request helps reveal the problematic nature of Rowlandson's attempt to restructure the boundaries of her cultural body. By teasing Rowlandson, "What, will you love Englishmen still?" the Indian emphasizes Rowlandson's removal from the boundaries that inform her cultural identity. By making light of her eagerness to identify with an English past upon which her status as an New

England Puritan was based, the Indian forces her to realize this flimsy attempt to re-establish a structure for her identity only reinforces her loss of Lancaster, the fundamental emblem for her English subjectivity.

As Rowlandson's removals distance her from the cultural center of her identity, Rowlandson's portrayal of her Indian captors shifts away from a strict reliance on binary characterization and towards what can best be called a hybrid identity. Rowlandson's early depictions of the Indians' speech and vocal inflections as barbarous, bestial, and demonic, becomes replaced with an insightful understanding and even an identification colored by compassion. In the "Eighth Remove," Rowlandson writes, "Now the Indians gather their forces to go against Northampton. Over night one went about yelling and hooting to give notice of the design. Whereupon they fell to boiling of ground nuts, and parching of corn for their provision" (181). As opposed to the earlier descriptions of the Indians' speech as demonic and indiscernible—a narrative tool, which previously served to other the Indians by making them appear bestial and inhuman—this depiction shows how Rowlandson has grown capable of understanding their language and even gleaning hopeful insight from their discourse. Rather than speaking harshly or in condemnation of the Indians' planned assault on Northampton, Rowlandson describes "their design" in a factual and even-handed tone. Even after the Indians return from their raid of the settlement, Rowlandson is elated at the spoils they have returned with and her potential to barter with the returning warriors. This decided shift away from the inclination to other the Indians based on their linguistic differences and opposition to the interests of English settlements is a result of Rowlandson's further removal from Puritan society. Her identification with the stakes of the Indian raid on Northampton, in conjunction with her elation at their successful return, indicates a hybridization of Rowlandson's identity, as she is no longer inclined to co-opt a discourse of alterity to distance her identity from that of her captors.

Near the middle of her narrative, Rowlandson begins to confuse personal pronouns within her narrative and disassociate linguistically from her previously concrete identity as an English Puritan. Particularly in the "Eighteenth Remove," the Other is described familiarly by Rowlandson, thus calling her English identity into question. On this occasion, Rowlandson recounts the events precipitated by an Indian woman's effort to feed the group by the boiling of horses' hooves.

Then I went to another wigwam, where there were two of the English children; the squaw was boiling horses feet; then she cut me off a little piece, and gave one of the English children a piece also. Being very hungry I had quickly eat up mine, but the child could not bite it, it was so tough and sinewy, but lay sucking, gnawing, chewing, and slabbering of it in the mouth and hand. Then I took it of the child, and eat it myself, and savory it was to my taste. (194-95)

Rowlandson's actions in this scene are startling. She literally pries the food from a child's mouth and devours it herself, without apology or remorse. However, her account of the event is even more startling than its contents. The use of the adjective "English" to describe the children others them, diametrically opposing them to the identity of the Squaw that is cooking the horses' feet. More troublingly, this also signifies that the children are distinct from Rowlandson's own identity. The children have ceased to be part of the collective Puritan "ours," have been deprived of any spiritual kinship and are now merely "English." This begins the bifurcation necessary to associate the English children with the Other. The particularly devastating impact this dissociation has upon the binary construction of identity can be seen because actions of this sort are associated in the Puritan mind with the uncivilized, savage, inhuman, and uncaring Indian. However, in this instance, Rowlandson's actions transpose the alterity normally ascribed to the Indian onto herself—as the one preying upon the innocent, English child. This makes the Englishness of the child a distancing and othering trait when—according to the binaries—the opposite should be true. Here, rather than refer to herself and the child as members of the same group, or even to define the child as "Other" without mentioning its specific nationality or race, Rowlandson attempts to construct a narrative space within which the child is the Other, and thus her actions against it become either defensible or, at least, their inhumanity becomes mitigated. In order to achieve this, Rowlandson dissociates with her own English identity and the civilized, charitable actions she formerly associated with it.

Moreover, her description of the food that she stole from the child's mouth, as well her mentioning the kindness of the woman boiling the hooves, associate attributes that were previously reserved to describe the English. Rather than unclean, revolting, and uncivilized, the horse hoof is "savory to [her] taste." These terms are hallmarks of the familiar, civilized preparation of food. The charity of the woman who provided the meal for the captives constitutes what was, at the beginning of the narrative, an inherently English and Puritan trait,

but again associates it with an Indian body. At this point, the binary system of Rowlandson's preconceptions as the basis for determining alterity become hybridized. Terms that should apply to the society she was removed from now apply equally to her captors. The Englishness of the child now stands in opposition to Rowlandson's identity, which becomes further alienated from its Englishness as it remains both unmentioned and unincorporated with the child's. The traits, which established the binary by aligning themselves with either the specifically English Puritan or the specifically Indian, have begun to escape from these groups and become equally associated with the Other.

Relatively near the beginning of her captivity, Rowlandson finds that despite being removed from the location and relationships she associates with being free, she has an increasing amount of agency. An agency that was unknown to her in her freedom. She realizes that that the Indians value her ability to make and mend articles of clothing. This translates into her acquisition of personal agency and economic utility. In the "Eighth Remove," she explains "During my abode in this place, Philip spake to me to make a shirt for his boy, which I did, for which he gave me a shilling. I offered it to my master, but he bade me keep it; and with it I bought a piece of horse flesh" (182). While not explicitly stated, the implications of Rowlandson's elation at discovering a skill she possesses that will not only be beneficial to the community, but profitable for her as an individual, indicates that this structure was not present in her Puritan life. Moreover, it is one of the few experiences in which she does not attempt to relate to a counterpart from Lancaster, thus verifying its binary difference from her present state. This indicates that though she is a captive, she experiences the free agency that she never knew while free.

During the conclusion of Rowlandson's narrative, and despite being returned to her community and husband, Rowlandson cannot return to her previous way of life. Her previous world-view was based on these preconceived, binary oppositions and the Puritan identity that they supported. There is constantly friction between her desires—which in Puritan society she is unable to act upon and is even restricted from giving any voice to—and the demands of the religious patriarchy. She remarks,

I was not before so much hemmed in as with merciless and cruel heathen, but now as much with the pitiful, tenderhearted, and compassionate Christians. In that poor, and distressed, and beggarly condition I was received in; I was kindly entertained in several houses. . . . We were now in the midst of love, yet not without much and frequent heaviness of heart. . . . About this time

the council ordered a day of public thanksgiving. Though I thought I had still cause of mourning, and being unsettled in our minds, we thought we would ride toward the eastwood, to see if we could hear anything concerning our children. (209)

This shows that the binary of freedom and captivity have dissolved entirely. Rowlandson feels more hemmed in now than she ever did while in captivity. Her actions are restricted by social power structures and the general distaste for emotional expression in Puritan society.

In *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*, Rowlandson expresses numerous preconceived binaries that inform her Puritan identity and influence how she relates to the world around her. However, her account shows that through the course of her captivity, these binaries fail to account for her experiences and become problematized, complicated, or overturned. By examining the traumatic narrative of Rowlandson's removal beyond the boundaries that inform her Puritan identity, a further understanding of how the ever-shifting boundaries of the temporal and geographical space can contribute to traumatic experience is gained, especially with regards to trauma victims' changed perception of their own identity.

Endnotes

- 1 For further discussion of trauma as a literal, veridical representation of the originary traumatic event as well as the stakes of this view within literary criticism see Cathy Caruth's *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, *Trauma: the Unclaimed Experience*, and Rachel Ley's *Trauma: a Genealogy*.
- 2 For a detailed discussion of the propensity for trauma to be mythologized as an originary cultural event see Dominick LeCapra's *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, and Kali Tal's *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*.

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