

Responsibility in the Face of Traumatic Memory of Sexual Violence

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“Philosophers and other knowledge constructors should seek ... to generate an infinite ‘dissemination’ of meanings. They should abjure any attempt to construct a closed system in which the other or the ‘excess’ are ‘pushed to the margins’ and made to disappear in the interest of coherence and unity. Their task is to disrupt and subvert rather than (re-) construct totalities or grand theories”¹

What I offer here are some preliminary thoughts on three levels. At one level, I consider the cultural trauma of sexual violence, and open up for rethinking the question of what an ethical engagement with this trauma might look like. On another level, I consider the question of the ethical as it weighs more generally on the work of feminist knowledge-production. Third, I look at the 1988 American film *The Accused* (Jonathan Kaplan/Paramount Pictures) as a popular-culture enactment of these disjunctures between conventional justice and ethical relation.

Sexual violence against women takes place with such shocking frequency in North American society that it is difficult not to numb to its persistent presence. As feminists, we are very *aware* of sexual violence. *We know* about it. At the same time this “knowledge” does not, for most, amount to a crisis, to a *traumatic* knowledge. This paradoxical coexistence of awareness or knowledge alongside a refusal of encounter or a numbness has to do, I will argue, with an urgently felt desire to retain at all costs a sense of the adequacy and stability of our knowledges and our knowledge-projects – a sense that the frameworks through which one interprets the world are not immanently vulnerable to dissolution. Such frameworks, as Foucault has outlined, are not only that through which one interprets but also that which constitutes and upholds the work of interpretation, and thus they maintain themselves as their own conditions of possibility.²

¹ Jane Flax, “The End of Innocence,” in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, edited by Judith Butler and Joan Scott, New York: Routledge, 1992, pp. 454.

² In “The Discourse on Language,” Foucault lays out his analytic of power, examining the ways in which power is exercised in and as discourse, as various operations, expressions and apparatuses of the

In the wake of the postfoundational fall of the grand narratives of modernity, and in the context of a problematic disciplinary feminist³ attachment to (the memory of) such narratives, the questions I consider here include: What do we “know” when we think we know about the trauma of sexual violence? And, more generally, in what ways might the pronouncement, the settling upon “I know” actually work against the possibility of attentively looking, of encountering, of witnessing or of learning? In what ways might the confidence that one “knows,” for example, sociologically or anthropologically (or

pervasive “will to truth.” In this work he proposes a number of what he provisionally calls “the main rules for the subjection of discourse” (227). These include operations both at the margins or exteriority of discourse, and internal to it; operations of exclusion at the margins from entry into authorized speech, and of the internal classification, ordering, distribution of discourse (220).

The operations internal to discourse, the “internal rules ... concerned with the principles of classification, ordering and distribution” (220) involve the self-reflexive operations of a discursive regime that maintains its operation within its own terms; they are figured as principles of limitation. The primary internal operations outlined are: the function of commentary, the author principle, and the organization of the disciplines. Both the function of commentary and the author principle limit the “hazards” or the dangerous/threatening (what Derrida would later call the “spectral”) excesses of discourses, Foucault argues, through the workings of an operationalized “identity,” taking the forms of “*repetition* and *sameness*, ... *individuality* and the *P*” (222). The internal operations of discourse exercised in the organization of disciplines found and continually conserve themselves through a continual process of the delimitation of the terms and conditions under which the authorization of new statements may take place, or the requirements for “new” knowledge to be admitted as knowledge into a discipline. Michel Foucault, “Appendix: The Discourse on Language,” in *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith, New York: Pantheon Books, 1972, pp. 220.

³ What I mean by the term “disciplinary feminism” is feminism or feminist thought that maintains itself within an academic discipline as well as other more grassroots forms of feminist thought that maintain themselves within the parameters of what might be envisioned as a singular “women’s movement” in Canada or the US, maintaining their practices as closely linked to certain indissoluble tenets or principles of “feminist knowledge” or “women’s experience.” My concern with “disciplinary feminism” grows out of my own experiences as a student in a graduate women’s studies program, and from my previous involvement with a sexual assault crisis center in Alberta. In both contexts the ways in which disciplines and institutions effectively discipline dissident speech is a critical concern. Wendy Brown illuminates the current paradox of “Women’s Studies” thus: “Women’s Studies as a contemporary institution... may be politically and theoretically incoherent, and tacitly conservative. It is incoherent because by definition it circumscribes uncircumscribable ‘women’ as an object of study, and it is conservative because it must, finally, resist all objections to such circumscription: hence the persistent theory wars, and race wars, and sex wars, notoriously ravaging women’s studies” (Brown, Wendy, “Symptoms: Moralism as Anti-Politics,” in *Politics Out of History*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001, pp. 34).

legally) be understood less as a reflection of knowledge or understanding than as a reflection of (what Britzman aptly terms) “the subject’s own passion for ignorance”?⁴

I will argue here that the very trope of “knowledge” itself *prevents* an encounter with that which would turn such “knowledge” into critical encounter with the vulnerability of its own terms. And this is important, in my view, because such an encounter – as traumatic, as crisis, as the kind of receptivity toward the Other that might be profoundly difficult for the self – is a critical *first step* of an attempt to do justice, or to approach an *ethical relation*, to the suffering of that other, in this case as the victim of sexual violence.

Drucilla Cornell writes of the ethical relation that it is “the aspiration to a nonviolative relationship to the Other, and to otherness more generally, that assumes responsibility to guard the Other against the appropriation that would deny her difference and singularity”⁵ A nonviolative relationship can be figured as one that does not violate “the Other *as Other*”⁶ to maintain stability of the self’s Same. The ethical, following Cornell, lies in the in-between, in the non-place that is the tension of the undecideable, or the aporia. Contrary to the common objection to deconstructive work, Cornell writes that “to run into an aporia, to reach the *limit* of philosophy, is not necessarily to be paralyzed ... [rather], the limit challenges us to reopen the question—to think again.”⁷ And it is at this limit that we might become aware of the inevitable excess to that which can be said, to that which can be represented or rendered legible in the closed terms of “knowledge.”

⁴ Deborah Britzman, “Queer Pedagogy and its Strange Techniques,” in *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects: Toward a Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning*, New York: SUNY Press, 1998, pp. 80.

⁵ Drucilla Cornell, “The Ethical Significance of the Chiffonnier,” in *The Philosophy of the Limit*. New York: Routledge, 1992, pp. 62; see also “The Ethical Message of Negative Dialectics,” in *The Philosophy of the Limit*. New York: Routledge, 1992, pp. 13.

In Derridean terms this excess, as excess, is not available to us except as a sort of signaling of an absence, of “the absence that brings us to mourning.”⁸ In thinking the terms of the ethical, then, one could figure the relation as one of the ongoing and never completed work of mourning. Using the figure of the loss of a loved object, in this case the loss of a vision of progress grounded in the self-presence and originary freedom of the subject, the attempt to do justice, to mourn “the Other as Other”⁹ can be figured as an attempt to attend to the *remains* (in Derrida’s terms) of the narrative of progress, or as the continual attempt and the continual “failure to fully recollect the Other.”¹⁰

Wendy Brown also considers the implications of the desire for stability enacted in the persistent return to static conceptions of knowledge. Comforting and comfortable modernist stories of wholeness and incorporation become, in Brown’s refiguration, panicked or pathological stories of failure and misrecognition, attachments that signal a failure to recognize a loss. As in Cornell’s account, assertion of knowledge of the Other is a structure more of comfort for the self than of an effort to reach ethical relation with/to the Other; such comfortable knowledges reflect the workings of a Hegelian logic of incorporation,¹¹ a movement that resists pushing toward the limits of the closed system of the Same into critical recognition of the self as itself unstable; a movement that refuses the inevitable splitting of systems and the visibility of what Derrida has identified as the

⁶ Drucilla Cornell, “The Ethical Significance of the Chiffonnier,” in *The Philosophy of the Limit*. New York: Routledge, 1992, pp. 73

⁷ *ibid.*, pp.70, 71.

⁸ *ibid.*, pp.71.

⁹ *ibid.*, pp.73.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, pp.73.

¹¹ As Robert Young writes, “...the fundamental problem concerns the way in which knowledge – and therefore theory, or history – is constituted through the comprehension and incorporation of the other. This has led to a series of attempts to reinscribe a place for, and a relation with, the other as other, outside the sphere of mastery and therefore, logically speaking, both infinite and beyond the scope of knowledge.”

structure of difference that haunts every sign, as the *trace*.¹² Brown writes that while “certain crucial collective stories in modernity have been disturbed or undermined in recent decades, ...they have remained those by which we live, even in their broken and less-than-legitimate-or-legitimizing form.”¹³ Our continued attachment to these “fundamental modernist precepts—progress, right, sovereignty, free will, moral truth, reason—would appear to resemble the epistemological structure of the fetish as Freud described it: ‘I know, but still ...’”¹⁴ Brown asks the critical question, “What happens when the beliefs that bind a political order become fetishes?”¹⁵ Turning away from recognition of the excesses constituted in the upholding of such totalizing precepts, the stories of wholeness are maintained by a refusal to turn logic’s own questioning back on itself. The desired object, a total system or vision of history or of progress, has been lost; there is no recovering this object now that its premises have been revealed to be rife with contradictions; its logic of presence, the movement of continuous incorporation of other into the (Hegelian) Same, revealed as a construction held together by the continual suturing over of an uncontainable structure of difference. We have not yet found an adequate replacement for this lost object of wholeness, however, and therefore we remain

“Chapter 1: White Mythologies,” in *White Mythologies: Writing Histories and the West*, London and New York: Routledge, 1990, pp. 12.

¹² As Spivak writes in her preface to *Of Grammatology*: “Armed with this simple yet powerful insight—powerful enough to “deconstruct the transcendental signified”—that the sign, phonic as well as graphic, is a structure of difference, Derrida suggests that what opens the possibility of thought is not merely the question of being, but also the never-annulled difference from ‘the completely other’... The structure of the sign is determined by the trace or track of that other which is forever absent. ...Derrida then gives the name ‘trace’ to the part played by the radically other within the structure of difference that is the sign.” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Translator’s Preface,” in *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976, pp. xvii.

¹³ Wendy Brown, “Introduction: Politics Out of History,” in *Politics Out of History*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001, pp. 3.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, pp.4.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, pp.4.

attached to it, in a contradictory state of desiring and upholding that which we know cannot “be”¹⁶, cannot materialize. We know, but still...

Returning to the question of sexual violence, the critical question then becomes whether thinking or understanding, whether learning, and crucially whether the beginnings of an ethical relation, really/ever comes outside of this encounter *with the failure* of knowledge. A critical engagement with this trauma (in terms of sexual violence) or this difference (in terms of the difference which returns to haunt feminism, as a *trace*) might mean less the delineation of programs that close off, but rather the *time* and the *attentiveness* and *vulnerability* to allow one to approach *encounter*, and the willingness to accept *despair* into one’s experience of the other, the self, and the other within the self; an encounter with the other which might call into question the very terms of that self or that structuring of sameness. Derrida writes that “[o]ne only ever thinks and takes responsibility – if indeed one ever does – by undergoing the aporia; without this, one is content to follow an inclination or apply a program.”¹⁷ I would like us to consider what might allow the (multiple) moment(s), as theorists and as subjects, to open towards, rather than avert our eyes from, this threatening/uncomfortable place, of splitting of self and same, of the “too much;” the unbearable and the undecideable, in

¹⁶ As Derrida writes, after deconstruction, or with deconstruction, the work of analysis cannot rest upon any “being” in totality. Even deconstruction itself is subject to this non-self-presence: “If, in an absurd hypothesis, there were one and only one deconstruction, a sole *thesis* of ‘Deconstruction,’ it would pose divisibility: difference as divisibility. Paradoxically, this amounts to raising the analytical stakes for a thinking that is very careful to take account of what always resists analysis (the originary complication, the nonsimple, the origin under erasure, the trace, or the affirmation of the gift as trace). This paradox is only apparent: it is because there is no indivisible element or simple origin that analysis is interminable...the truth without truth of deconstruction, at least the one that is de-marcated both from the ‘spiritual bond’... and from that always ultimate reassembling of the same in which, for Heidegger, all difference is gathered up: the one, Being, the *logos*, the *polemos*—and *Geist*.” Jacques Derrida, “Resistances,” in *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, translated by Peggy Kamuf, Pascale-Anne Brault, and Michael Naas. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996, pp. 33-4.

order to try and jar loose the persistent frames of subject/object, self/other, theory/practice, that often contain feminist politics. A critical engagement and ethical encounter might then rely on the recognition that one cannot approach encounter or recognition of the despair of the other without entering into (a form of) despair – aporia – oneself.

Using a piece of popular culture representation not as *representative of*, but rather as one iteration among many of the failed encounter with such traumatic witness as would do justice, I both question the modernist maintenance of a static distinction between “politics” and “culture,” and consider what such failure of witness, recognized *as* failure, might signal as a possibility for hopefulness, as the possibility for an emergence of the new, of learning. In considering *The Accused*, I will outline this persistent return to “knowledge,” and to “truth” in cultural presentation and spectatorial relation to an other’s testimony, and will ask what this (fetishized) attachment and return enables and what it might be preventing.

What one might move towards through considering the failure of witness signaled in *The Accused*, as a reenactment of a larger feminist and cultural failure of witness, are the beginnings of an ethical engagement with the societal trauma, awaiting recognition, that can in some way become visible, though perhaps only in fragments; perhaps only through recognition of the failure of witness and of mourning ever to recuperate or do justice to its object. Such an ethical engagement requires an openness, a hospitality in the face of encounter with the irreconcilably other; an enactment of responsibility that does not turn away even in awareness that the encounter will cause the comfortable,

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, “‘To Do Justice to Freud’: The History of Madness in the Age of Psychoanalysis,” in *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, translated by Peggy Kamuf, Pascale-Anne Brault, and

comforting structures of knowledge to crumble; even, *especially* in the awareness that it may cause our frames of reference to shatter.¹⁸

By engaging with and pointing towards the ways in which *The Accused*, widely reviewed and thought of as a film that “finally” showed the “reality” of sexual assault, failed to enter into, or to force the viewer to enter into, the kind of critical encounter that I speak of here, I hope to signal the beginnings of what such an encounter might look like. I choose this film both because it is on one level very jarring and on another level critically *not jarring enough*, and also because of its status as a familiar part of the North American cultural landscape as an iconic depiction of sexual violence;¹⁹ it operates as something that was difficult to watch but which offers its viewer the sense that they have been attentive enough; that now they ‘know’ and/or ‘have recognized’ the reality of sexual violence. Its structure as a story of redemption, a story in which justice is fought for and finally won, can be viewed as perhaps symptomatic of a cultural fetishization of the closed story; of moral truth found and justice reclaimed.

The trauma of sexual violence in *The Accused* is the rape of Sarah Tobias, a young, working-class white woman, in the backroom of a bar by multiple attackers, while a number of other men not only watched but cheered on and encouraged the attack.²⁰

Michael Naas, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996, pp. 113.

¹⁸ As Phelan writes in the introduction to her *Mourning Sex*, “The method here *is* troubling and is not offered in the spirit of a ‘solution’” Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories*, London and New York: Routledge, 1997, pp.17-18.

¹⁹ Horeck writes of the film that it was “the first studio film to deal directly with the trauma of rape” (pp.5), and of the rape scene that it is one of a number of “filmic image[s] that has assumed a quasi-mythic status in the popular imaginary” (“‘They did worse than nothing’: Rape and Spectatorship in *The Accused*.” *Canadian Review of American Studies*, Vol.30, no.1, 2000. Canadian Association for American Studies, University of Calgary and University of Windsor. Available at: <http://www.utpjournals.com/jour.ihtml?lp=cras/horeck.html>. Accessed: April 10, 2002, pp. 2).

²⁰ The film is both fictional and—quite loosely—based on an actual event, a gang-rape that took place in New Bedford, Massachusetts, at Big Dan’s Tavern on March 6, 1983. The relationship of the film to the original rape in New Bedford is an issue that is important not only for consideration of the relation between “real life” and popular culture but also for the erasure of ethnicity both in the film and the problematic use

The film begins immediately after the attack, and builds around Sarah being repeatedly denied the opportunity to tell her story, to testify to her trauma. The plot builds around this repeated failure of those around Sarah to recognize her or hear her – those intended to help her (her lawyer, the rape counselor and medical staff at the hospital) are programmatic in their relation to her, and the others around her are unwilling to hear, encounter or be attentive to her in other ways. The progress of the narrative then builds around this repeated denial toward an eventual, redemptive scene, in which Sarah’s “truth” is understood to have been told (in the courtroom).

Following a building tension of failure of ethical witness to Sarah’s trauma, the narrative structure of the film climaxes in the court scene, in which Sarah will finally, it seems, have the opportunity to tell her truth, and to be *heard*. It is in this scene that the flashback sequence of the attack is staged, and the viewer understands that they are finally going to witness the attack. Surprisingly, however, it is not Sarah’s testimony that prompts the flashback sequence, but rather the testimony of “Ken,” a bystander to the rape, who watched the attack, stunned, and eventually called the police. Ken’s testimony, as that of an “objective” witness, serves the demands of the formalized “justice” of the courtroom and, critically, fulfills the promise of the film, to present the truth and deliver the “justice” that Sarah has been repeatedly denied. The difficulty here, in terms of ethical witness, is that the partial nature any attempt to provide “truth” is concretely *denied* by the staging of the flashback in the film: while the story being told in the

of race/ethnicity in the media coverage of the rape trial (As Horeck notes, it was “the first rape case ever to be televised in America” and “the first criminal trial to be televised by the Cable News Network [CNN]” [pp. 3]). The rape took place in the context of a working-class Portuguese community, and both the victim and the perpetrators of the rape were Portuguese-Americans. The troubling displacement of ethnicity and the relationship of the film to this event on which it is loosely based are important issues, but are beyond the scope of this paper. See Horeck, cited above, for an critical explorations of these tensions.

narrative is Ken's singular account of the attack, the camera angles in the scene jump from one perspective to the next, placing the viewer in the perspective not only of Ken himself, but also of each of the attackers, of Sarah's friend who glances from across the bar, and of Sarah herself during the attack. The vulnerability and partiality of witness is denied, and the viewer is reassured that the "whole story" can be, indeed has been, told. As Horeck notes, "such a broadening of visual perspective is consistent with the film's attempt to portray not just any one 'reality,' but rather the historical reality of rape."²¹ Not only is "truth" or "knowledge" presented as easily accessible to the witness, but "justice" is reaffirmed as achieved and achievable regardless of its being staged *outside of* the perspective of the individual to whom this justice is addressed.

The film ends with a black screen on which the following two statistics appear in white typeface: "In the United States a rape is reported every six minutes," and "One out of every four rape victims is attacked by two or more assailants." In forcefully returning us to the factual,²² to knowledge that one can straightforwardly take in and integrate as "truth," the movie repeats the closing of the circle around the alterity of the other; the incorporation of the testimony of another's suffering into the structures of the knowable, the processable. Within the terms of a structure of fetishization of lost narratives of completeness, and the consequent presentation of a singular (and second-hand) testimony

²¹ Horeck, Tanya, " 'They did worse than nothing': Rape and Spectatorship in *The Accused*." *Canadian Review of American Studies*, Vol.30, no.1, 2000. Canadian Association for American Studies, University of Calgary and University of Windsor. Available at: <http://www.utpjournals.com/jour.ihtml?lp=cras/horeck.html>. Accessed: April 10, 2002, pp. 10.

²² As Schlesinger *et al* point out, this postscript "signals the film's claim to be grounded in documentary realism" (Schlesinger, Philip, R. Emerson Dobash, Russell P. Dobash and C. Kay Weaver. *Women Viewing Violence*. London: The British Film Institute, 1992, pp. 134).

Horeck also notes that this postscript "is meant to provide documentary reinforcement of [the film's] truth claims ... this postscript asserts the historical truth of the story that has just been depicted, but, more than that, it presents the film as a kind of memorial to all rape victims...*The Accused* wants to tell *the* story of rape" (pp. 5).

to a trauma as sufficient without question to the experience of the victim of such a trauma, *The Accused* stands as an enactment or repetition of a disciplinary feminist reading practice that stops short of critical encounter with the unassimilability of the experience of the other and short of the obligation to approach ethical encounter with that trauma as a willingness to sit with instability and to recognize the violence that is done in the processing of such narratives through a progress-driven, programmatic incorporation model of learning. Folding the other back into its own logic, the film enacts the failure of conventional “justice” and the failure of the self, desiring stability and closure over open-endedness, to approach the ethical relation, as the work of mourning in Derrida’s terms. Paradoxically, it is a failure to recognize the inevitable *failure* of knowledge that accounts for the missed opportunity to do justice, to move towards ethical relation. The movement from trauma and breakdown through resolve and integration to unproblematic truth, twice performed (in Ken’s testimony and in the [literally] black and white ‘facts’ presented on the final screen) moves in an opposite direction to the work of mourning, which must recognize itself as never accomplished. The movement from trauma through integration and into truth here demonstrates the circuitous return of a logic of identity; the repeated incorporation of that which is alter into that which is same, is totalizable, is systematic. Played out in *The Accused*, we see a repetition, a symptomatic enactment of ‘knowledge’ as a defense against *encounter* of alterity of that which is unbearable because it is not available to be made fully present within the structure of logic. In closing down as simply “achieved” Sarah’s repetitive seeking of an ethical witness to her truth, and in failing to question the ability of the eyewitness witness, Ken, to *know* Sarah’s truth, the narrative works as a filmic enactment of the urgently felt desire and compulsion within

feminist and other disciplinary theorizing to uphold a lost ideal of presence, of knowledge, of wholeness, and thereby prevents approaching an ethical, as nonviolative, relationship with the Other.

A trial always revisits or re-enacts a trauma, but where the trauma there re-enacted could potentially open onto a larger cultural-historical memory, or witnessing of trauma (an abyss or chasm, an unbearable truth), the terms within which that expression can be heard or comprehended—what Britzman has called the *reading practices*²³--in a trial setting work hard to foreclose on that potential opening. The terms of the trial, of legal discourse, of cultural containment, work against “the dynamics of traumatic rupture.”²⁴ The terms of disciplinary learning and theorizing, similarly, work against the dynamics of *critical* rupture, both through upholding the compartmentalizing of “knowledges” and “objects” (which amount to basically the same thing), and through their continued attachment to a structure of representation that denies the loss it has suffered instead of “working through”²⁵ and towards recognition of the implications of that loss, instead of attending to “what those losses may release us to imagine.”²⁶

²³ Britzman writes: “Reading practices... are socially performative. And part of the performance might well be the production of normalcy—itself a hegemonic sociality—if techniques of reading begin from a standpoint of refusing the unassimilability of difference and the otherness of the reader. This case of ‘exorbitant normality,’ or passion for ignorance, occurs when ‘the other’ is rendered either as unintelligible or as intelligible only as a special event, never every day ... My interest is in thinking of reading practices as possibly unhinging the normal from the self in order to prepare the self to encounter its own conditions of alterity: reading practices as an imaginary site for multiplying alternative forms of identifications and pleasures not so closely affixed to—but nonetheless transforming—what one imagines their identity imperatives to be.” Deborah Britzman, “Queer Pedagogy and its Strange Techniques,” in *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects: Toward a Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning*, New York: SUNY Press, 1998, pp. 84-5.

²⁴ Sharon Rosenberg, “Standing in A Circle of Stone: Rupturing the Binds of Emblematic Memory,” in *Between Hope and Despair: Pedagogy and the Remembrance of Historical Trauma*, edited by R. Simon, S. Rosenberg and C. Eppert, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2000, pp.79.

²⁵ Britzman explores the notion of “working through,” in a psychoanalytic frame, finding that “part of what must be worked through are the projective identifications that impede our capacity to make an ethical relation to the stranger, to encounter vulnerability as a relation and thus move beyond the impulse of repeating the trauma by placing helplessness and loss elsewhere.” Deborah Britzman, “If the Story Cannot End: Deferred Action, Ambivalence, and Difficult Knowledge,” in *Between Hope and Despair: Pedagogy*

Shoshana Felman writes that Freud, in his discovery of the unconscious, recognized “for the first time in the history of culture, that one does not have to *possess*, or *own* the truth, in order to effectively *bear witness* to it; that speech is unwittingly testimonial; and that the speaking subject constantly bears witness to a truth that nonetheless continues to escape him, a truth that is, essentially, *not available* to its own speaker.”²⁷ I have extended this notion to argue that not only does one not have to possess the truth in order to bear witness to it, but that when one makes claim to such a possession of truth, one has effectively sutured over what one claims to be attempting to gain access to.²⁸ In the truth-structure present in a disciplinary feminism holding fast to the lost object of moral truth, of progress, of knowledge, and of “woman” as self-present referent to its signification, the motion continues to be one of turning away, of refusing the encounter that would call into question the terms of feminism’s “Self” in the face of its Other. *The Accused*, in its almost mythical status as American popular culture’s first depiction of the “truth” of rape, occupies the space of a symptomatic playing-out of that refusal; the film is unwittingly testimonial in making visible the truth which continually escapes it; paradoxically, this truth is that of the failure of “truth” to do justice.

and the Remembrance of Historical Trauma, edited by Roger I. Simon, Sharon Rosenberg, and Claudia Eppert, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., New York: 2000, pp. 35.

²⁶ Wendy Brown, “Introduction: Politics Out of History,” in *Politics Out of History*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001, pp. 5.

²⁷ Shoshana Felman, “Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching,” in *Testimony: Crisis and Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, edited by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, New York and London: Routledge, 1992, pp. 24.

²⁸ In Levinas’ terms, the possession of an other’s truth entails no less than a turning away from the face of the Other, a failure of responsibility. This non-presence of the Other to the self, or the inevitable excess that remains in any attempt to “grasp” the Other, is exemplified in the attempt to grasp, or to know, the Other’s suffering. As Levinas writes: “It is as if suffering were not just a *datum*, refractory to the synthesis of the Kantian ‘I think’ – which is capable of reuniting and embracing the most heterogeneous and disparate data into order and meaning in its *a priori* forms – but the *way* in which the refusal, opposing the assemblage of data into a meaningful whole, rejects it; at once what disturbs order and this disturbance itself” Emmanuel Levinas, “Useless Suffering,” in *Entre Nous: Thinking of the Other*, translated by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 91.

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