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Violent Trauma, Culture, and Power

An Interdisciplinary Exploration in Lived Religion

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*Dedicated to the lives and memories of Moses, Kenny, LeVar,
Jaewon, and Evens—as well as all others lost to or impacted
by violence in our one precious shared world.*

*In our continuing moral bonds,
“The dead have a pact with the living.”*

*Lyric from Dr. Ysaję M. Barnwell’s song “Breaths”
 (“Breaths” Lyrics By Birago Diop/Musical Setting By
Ysaję M. Barnwell, Barnwell’s Notes Publishing, Inc.)*

A Prelude of Lived Experiences

From where do any books arise, even “academic” books? Whether we acknowledge it or not, our lived experiences in the world shape what we study and what we write—and perhaps there is a larger academic “objective truth” and capacity for connection, even sacredness, in acknowledging and taking ownership of this very human reality. Perhaps we should begin to *demand* a detailed preface of lived experiences—the social experiences and identities from which we write—for every academic book published as a matter of ethical accountability within institutional systems of domination. *My* interest in the interdisciplinary exploration of violent trauma evolves out of my own lived experiences with trauma and social identity border crossings, as well as out of specific sociohistorical events.

I grew up as a fourth-generation mid-western American, racialized as white and of Irish, French, German, and Welsh descent. Historical trauma in my family system taught me how trauma leaves its marks, even as the generations seek to resist transmitting it—painful marks as well as marks of survival, resiliency, and strength. I was baptized Catholic, but generally unchurched and without religious language and practices, other than broad cultural and semi-secularized ones until my late young adulthood. I also was the first in my family history to complete a college

education through the generosity of financial aid at an elite women's college in the United States, Wellesley College, acquiring the experience of being a "class cultural traveler" in this as well as through additional higher education. My lifeworld journey of meaning-making eventually led me to discovering a Unitarian Universalist (UU) congregation in Newton, MA at age 28 in late 1989. This was my first exposure to being part of a religious community and learning religious concepts and language that were connected to religious practices we engaged in together. This time period also began a different intersection of my life with history. In this intersection with history, a need arose for deepened connection to religious practices that could assist me with the violent trauma to which I was exposed vicariously for many years to come.

In April 1991, two young boys, Charles Copney, Jr., age 11, and Corey Grant, age 15, were killed in a gang related incident in Roxbury, MA. Charles was the youngest such victim during a period of heightened violence in Boston.¹ My particular suburban congregation already was involved in racial and economic justice work,² but in the aftermath of Charles' and Corey's murders, my then minister, Reverend Gerry Krick, spontaneously turned his pulpit over to an African-American community activist. At the activist's invitation, members of the First Unitarian Society in Newton began to develop a youth program primarily for African-American families and children in low-income Roxbury. This was the beginning of what would become a weekend youth ministry I led as a lay community minister³ for nearly 18 years, a youth ministry placed under the UU Urban Ministry a year after its founding. Simultaneously, I entered social work school and worked for many years in urban clinical social work, including eventually as a clinic director and now university educator in the field of social work. It was through a social work school retreat and my initial encounters with stories of violent trauma that I learned to practice as a clinical social worker/UU layperson in the Zen Buddhist tradition of Thich Naht Hanh, particularly the practice of mindfulness in the encounter with suffering.

In the journey of completing this book, I realized how deeply these life identity border crossings and initial professional career choices enculturate and frame the way I view the world and human being in it, such as the interdisciplinary academic lens and language I bring as both an urban

clinical social worker and urban minister, as well as a practical theologian by later training. These lens include social work's dual focus on the macro (sociocultural) and micro (clinical) levels of social justice and human ecological development, as well as social work's emphasis on strengths and resiliencies in human development.⁴ Ten years after becoming a clinical social worker, I also chose to go to a Methodist seminary and became ordained as a UU clergyperson and community minister, a non-creedal liberal religious tradition with a heavy emphasis on ethical relations and social justice. For contemporary UUs, a central unifying theological role is played in this tradition through: (1) *theological anthropology*, a belief in the finite and contextual nature of human knowledge and capacities in relationship to knowing the divine, as well as an affirmation of several sources for knowing the divine, and (2) *covenantal theology*, a practice of promising to be in relationship with and accountable to each other according to certain ethical principles around shared experiences of and public practices in relationship to the divine.⁵ These two core beliefs and practices result in a professed *public theological* respect for the ultimate transcending mystery⁶ that underlies all human faith or spiritual quests, including secular quests for truth and justice, even if private beliefs and spiritual practices are quite diverse.⁷

I brought to seminary, as well as to my later practical theological doctoral studies, my eclectic, and perhaps eccentric or “queer,” lived experiences of border crossing social identities, spiritual practices, and intellectual disciplines—and still a relative ignorance of the breadth and depth of the language and culture of the Christian tradition. This enculturation into a personally meaningful connection to the Christian tradition came later and continues to evolve as I hold it in tension with the meaningfulness of a Buddhist tradition alongside the meaningfulness of a humanist heritage, inclusive of the secular social sciences—a joyful and “queer” hodgepodge best experienced as “meaning full” in the sacred path of living tradition sources of revelation for a Unitarian Universalist.⁸ As I have walked this sacred path, I also have grown more sensitized to the practices through which this particular “queer” religious tradition has held itself together, including through practices of play and experimentation with language and metaphor.⁹

In this sense, I remain truly a practical theologian, equally alongside my social work and ministerial identities, in a “confessional” commitment (understood in a broader metaphorical sense) to my lived religious and spiritual tradition as a UU. If the root metaphoric meaning of “faith” is that in which one grounds one’s trust and if the root metaphoric meaning of “to confess” is simply to admit one’s adherence to and belief in a faith tradition—a faith tradition that encompasses ethical promises and practices of how to be and act in relation with one another and our broader world rather than being restricted to particular doctrinal beliefs—then *confessional* is indeed what I am. I am *confessional* to this queer contemporary religion called Unitarian Universalism, forged as a consolidation of two different centuries-long Christian traditions in the crucible of the 1960’s political upheavals of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and war. If the term “queer” also is understood in its root metaphoric meaning as “peculiar,” “off-center,” “strange or eccentric” as judged so by a dominant culture normatively, then indeed Unitarian Universalism is judged as a heretical and queer religion by a dominant Christian culture and Christian institutions of power. Yet I have a sneaking suspicion that it also embodies the larger potential for Christianity when queered—when freed in its faith *practices* to encounter the depths of difference in lived experiences, culture, language, and worldviews among peoples of faith.¹⁰

My formal and professional education in both fields—social work and the Christian tradition—occurred during my time of praxis with this inner-city youth ministry over nearly two decades with the UU Urban Ministry. As a living praxis, this meant border crossing, translation, and finding mutual relevance and meaning-making in creating connections, both intellectual and pastoral, between graduate school, human service agencies, suburban churches, and community immersions, as well as across borders of race, class, gender, ability, sexual orientations, religion, and exposure to violent trauma. The formative event for this book occurred in the first semester of my doctoral studies when, in September 2006, my African American goddaughter’s 17-year-old nephew, Kenny Hall, was shot and killed in Boston, a murder that remains unsolved as of the writing of this book.

It was this tragic event that brought me into more direct contact with the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute, a subject of study in this book,

though I had been well aware of their work for many years and had previously experienced the murder of another young adult related to our youth ministry in 1995, Moses Grant. In the month after Kenny's murder, October 2006, our UU urban youth ministries experienced three additional murders within a week's span, murders that impacted on staff and youth, including another young adult related to several of the youth in my ministry, LeVar Jackson. Once again, I referred families to the Peace Institute. During this period, I also felt compelled to take pictures of the spontaneous street memorials that sprang up in the aftermath for both Kenny and LeVar, memorials that I noticed springing up more frequently since the widely covered murder of ten-year-old Trina Persad in 2002.¹¹

In the spring of 2007, I was taking an anthropology course for my doctoral program when I mentioned the phenomenon of the street memorials I had been observing and was encouraged by my professor to engage in a pilot study of these spontaneous shrines. My research introduced me to cultural folklorist Jack Santino's international studies of spontaneous shrines and to UU ethicist Sharon Welch's expanded metaphorical understanding of Johann Baptist Metz' Christian use of the phrase "dangerous memories."¹² Both helped me to consider the political performative and prophetic (a Jewish-Christian-Islamic term) protest function of such street memorials alongside their commemorative function. This initial pilot study led to a separate pilot study of the funerals and specialized orders of funeral service developed by the Peace Institute. Then as my prospectus for my dissertation was being written in mid-2010, another young man who had grown up in my youth ministries was shot and killed, Jaewon Martin. The summer after completion of my dissertation, I lost one more from my youth ministry, Evens Archer. The names I share here are not the only male and female young people sacrificed to violence whose stories and lives I knew or came to know and care about over my years in urban ministry and research.

This book thus is threaded with autoethnographic experiences and perspectives and a deep sense of commitment to the families of Boston whose lives have been so deeply intertwined with my own for well over 25 years now. My exposure to the impact of violent trauma has been up close and personal, deepening my own need to lift up the voices of those

who have suffered the unspeakable, as well as the voices of those who companion and serve them in the aftermath. This includes those in my own UU denomination who discover that trauma and violence cut across all the lines of race and class and gender, as well as power, privilege, and other oppressions that may otherwise divide us in our sociocultural imaginations and limited institutions and life experiences. There are no neat “objective” lines here—trauma and violence show no respect for our desires for tidiness and control, including the control perhaps that the cultural lens and language of our respective intellectual disciplines might seek to impose. If I can “rattle the self-imposed cages” of our disciplinary boundaries as we seek to learn from and address violent trauma in our larger world, including beyond a US context, then I will feel that I indeed have provided a service to the voices of survivors, and those who serve them, those from my particular studies as well as hopefully others beyond these particular studies.

Boston, MA, USA

Michelle Walsh

Notes

1. See a Frontline documentary, “A Kid Kills,” available at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/programs/info/1022.html> (accessed October 16, 2013).
2. Issues of race and class were brought to light for Boston area congregations when a white suburban man accused a black man of murdering his pregnant wife, but later admitted his own guilt and committed suicide. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Stuart_\(murderer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Stuart_(murderer)) (accessed October 16, 2013).
3. In the Unitarian Universalist tradition, community ministry is ministry that occurs beyond the walls of the parish—what some might term the “missionary” ministry of Unitarian Universalism, whether lay or ordained. An early nineteenth-century pioneer in community ministry, Rev. Joseph Tuckerman, was recognized to be an ecumenical pioneer in social work as well by a Catholic priest. See Daniel

- T. McColgan, “Joseph Tuckerman: Pioneer in American Social Work” (PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 1940).
4. A few foundational books and articles in the field of social work illustrating these perspectives include: C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959); Urie Bronfenbrenner, ed., *Making Human Beings Human: Bioecological Perspectives on Human Development* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005); and Dennis Saleeby, “Power in The People: Strengths and Hope,” *Advances in Social Work*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Fall 2000): 127–136.
 5. The Unitarian Universalist Association was birthed when two historically Christian traditions, Unitarianism and Universalism, consolidated in 1961, initially creating a shared statement of principles in its bylaws and then later adding explicit theological language of “covenant” in a re-covenanting process, first in 1985 and then lastly in 1995. Tracking specifics of these General Assembly processes represent practical theological studies yet to be done for Unitarian Universalism. In the meantime, see Mark W. Harris, *Historical Dictionary of Unitarian Universalism* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004). The newly formed association was tested in many ways by the social and political turbulence of the 1960s through the various civil rights movements; racism and what would be called “the black empowerment” period; the Vietnam War and the draft; and generally the political empowerment of the voices of and actions by marginalized peoples (youth, women, people of color, gays and lesbians, etc.). See these additional sources for further historical perspectives and their legacy for contemporary struggles of Unitarian Universalists: Warren R. Ross, *The Premise and the Promise: The Story of the Unitarian Universalist Association* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2001); Leslie Takahashi Morris, Chip Roush, and Leon Spencer, *The Arc of the Universe is Long: Unitarian Universalists, Anti-Racism and the Journey from Calgary* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2009), as well as other resources listed in the bibliography.
 6. See a former UUA president, William F. Schulz, “Our Faith,” in *The Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide*, ed., William G. Sinkford, 4th ed. (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1993/1997/2004), 1–6, in which

he writes that Unitarian Universalists “. . . *respect the mystery more*. We believe . . . that no single religion . . . has a monopoly on wisdom; that the answers to the great religious questions change from generation to generation; and that the ultimate truth about God and Creation, death, meaning, and the human spirit cannot be captured in a narrow statement of faith. The mystery itself is always greater than its name . . .” This essay on “Our Faith” survived at least three editions since 1993 (until the publication of the most recent pocket guide) as a *written practice* for explaining the Unitarian Universalist faith tradition to a newcomer. See also the Commission on Appraisal, *Engaging Our Theological Diversity* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2005) and their *Interdependence: Renewing Congregational Polity* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1997) for further history and empirical data on contemporary Unitarian Universalism. There also is a very strong *ecological* orientation within the Unitarian Universalist tradition, beyond its mystical and ethical commitments and its focus on the language of “love.” A recent dissertation by a UU scholar tracks historical Transcendentalist contributions to evolving ecotheology possibilities within liberal Christianity, as well as its complicity in manifest destiny. See Sheri M. Prud’homme, “Gleam Of The Infinite Majesty: The Interplay of Manifest Destiny and Ecotheology in Thomas Starr King’s Construction of Yosemite as Sacred Text” (PhD diss., Graduate Theological Union, 2015). I also have argued in other settings that contemporary Unitarian Universalist “God-Talk” expands beyond the anthropomorphic through its seventh principle: “the interdependent web of existence”—that this also becomes the tradition’s metaphoric “God-Talk” in practice in addition to “mystery” “justice,” and “love” and which bears further theological development in and analyses of *practices* within the tradition.

7. When I bring the term “public theology” to bear on Unitarian Universalism as a religious tradition, I am drawing on Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore’s definition that public theology “attempts to analyze and influence the wider social order . . . Different from civil religion’s generic universal appeal, public theology attempts to make a

recognizably valid and self-critical claim for the relevance of specific religious beliefs and practices,” in Miller-McLemore, “Pastoral Theology as Public Theology: Revolutions in the ‘Fourth Area’,” 1370, In *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, edited by Rodney J. Hunter, 1370–1380 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990/2005). For Unitarian Universalists, the term “public theology” applies both to a congregation’s particular covenant and to the larger associational covenant between congregations. Unitarian Universalists distinguish in *practice* between the personal faith and practices of individuals and the public faith and practices of a congregation and the larger association or denomination. There is a unification of diverse personal theologies and practices, within any particular congregation, as well as between congregations in the larger association, through profession to a public faith and ethical practices. This public profession emphasizes respect for personal access to the divine and a covenant to ethical principles of shared practice, which then creates an umbrella under which a significant amount of public *prophetic* witness and social justice work may occur. Thus, there is an underlying theology at play from the stance of theological anthropology and ecclesial organization that marks what results as a self-critical “public theology” in shared beliefs and practices for Unitarian Universalists.

8. See www.uua.org (accessed March 2, 2016) for more information generally on the tradition, as well as <http://www.uua.org/beliefs> (accessed March 2, 2016) for information regarding the tradition’s seven ethical principles and six living tradition sources to which its congregations within the Unitarian Universalist Association are bound by covenant.
9. See Unitarian ethicist, theologian, and minister James Luther Adams’ early work in this area, “Root Metaphors of Religious Social Thought,” in *An Examined Faith: Social Context and Religious Commitment*, 243–255 (1973/1988), edited by George K. Beach (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), as well as a later series of essays produced in response to a controversy over religious language, Dean Grodzins, ed., *A Language of Reverence* (Chicago: Meadville Lombard Press, 2004). See also Tom Owen-Towle, *Freethinking Mystics With Hands*:

- Exploring the Heart of Unitarian Universalism* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1998) and Fredric John Muir, *Heretics' Faith: Vocabulary for Religious Liberals* (Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis, MD, 2001).
10. Kathryn Lofton ponders, "A church of the queer may or may not be possible" (p. 203) in her chapter "Everything Queer?" in *Queer Christianities: Lived Religion in Transgressive Forms* (New York: New York University Press, 2015). While she stays within a current association of the term "queer" with homosexuality, she also opens a door to a broader metaphoric interpretation in saying, "... Christianity itself was also queer: a tradition simultaneously averse to expressions of homosexuality while also offering multiple scriptural, ritual, and social experiences of self-understanding, self-formation, and revelation as a dissenting subject" (p. 199). See also Rev. Elizabeth M. Edman, *Queer Virtue: What LGBTQ People Know About Life and Love and How It Can Revitalize Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016); Pamela Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015); and Ian Barnard, *Queer Race: Cultural Interventions in the Racial Politics of Queer Theory* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004/2008). However, I stress that I am broadening the metaphoric use of the term "queer" beyond solely its contemporary usage in the BGLTQI context, though it remains inclusive of that context, particularly in attention to the marking of bodies and visceral discomforts raised as well as institutional oppression of bodies. See also Janet R. Jakobsen, "The Body Politic vs. Lesbian Bodies: Publics, Counterpublics, and the Use of Norms," in *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition and Norms*, 116–136, edited by Rebecca S. Chopp and S.G. Davaney (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997) for hints of intersectionality possibilities in queer theory as well.
 11. See http://www.boston.com/yourtown/boston/roxbury/articles/2012/06/01/conflict_of_interestsmemorial_park_is_targeted_for_housing/ (accessed October 16, 2013) and http://archive.boston.com/yourtown/news/dorchester/2013/08/hold_in_dorchester_a_slaying_youth_is_remembered_through_art.html (accessed May 4, 2016).

12. See Jack Santino, *Signs of War and Peace: Social Conflict and the Uses of Symbols in Public in Northern Ireland* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2001) and Jack Santino, ed., *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), as well as Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1977/2007) and Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000, 2nd edition).

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Opportunities to present at, gain feedback from, or network through a variety of conferences and gatherings over several years helped me to hone concepts and understandings of the significance of interdisciplinary explorations for the societal challenge posed by violent trauma. These included presentations at an international conference on Trauma and Spirituality in Belfast in 2011 and a Trauma and Lived Religion conference in Amsterdam in 2015, along with attendance at other 2015 conferences such as the Council on Social Work Education, Jean Baker Miller Summer Intensive Institute, and the Internal Family Systems annual conference. Additional presentations over several years with the American Academy of Religion, as well as with the UU Scholars and the Collegium of Liberal Religious Scholars, were helpful in the early stages of my original research. More recently, presentations at a 2016 transdisciplinary conference on theopoetics and at the 2016 Biennial Association of Practical Theology, as well as at the 2016 Cultural Studies Association, shaped some final thoughts and revisions. Research also needs institutional funding, and I therefore am grateful for several years of financial support received for the original research through Boston University's School of Theology and their Center for Practical Theology, as well as for the major scholarship I received from the Fund for Nurturing UU Scholarship under the Panel on Theological Education.

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