

# THE REPRODUCTION OF RELATIONAL TRAUMA

AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL  
FAILURE OF CAPITALISM





depends on choosing the relationships that make us feel alive, not the ones that claim to keep us safe. This would be a collective choice, to create the conditions where sharing “the wretchedness inside” is a process of liberating our aliveness from the environmental failure of capitalism, not a temptation to reinforce it.

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we can create the conditions for collective healing that western psychology doesn't teach us. As a collective, we have an opportunity to embrace alternatives to our learned helplessness as individuals and challenge systemic environmental failure.

At the heart of NARM is the belief that at the deepest level we can't be disconnected from ourselves, we can only lose awareness of ourselves. Biologically speaking, the same is true of our need for collective belonging, even though the dominant culture conditions us to reject this. As capitalist logics become a clear and present collective life threat, can we choose to feel through the shame and grief of returning to our earthly bodies? Can we grieve the historical consequences and intergenerational pain of unresolved shame in relationship? What becomes possible when we bring our awareness to patterns of connection and disconnection that have generalized as culture? Can we create a network of autonomous facilitating environments that link together to form the optimal conditions of a self-mending social fabric? How would we care for our collective body if we trusted that we were one? There's never been a better time to look the authoritarian nature of capitalism in the eyes and recognize that our survival

## "NOBODY'S FREE UNTIL EVERYBODY'S FREE"

British child psychiatrist Donald Winnicott introduced the concept of the "facilitating environment" to describe the responsive container that "good enough" parents create to support a child's maturation (Winnicott 1965). Essentially the good enough facilitating environment is attuned to the child's unique nature. Winnicott writes:

"We can say that the facilitating environment makes possible the steady progress of the maturational processes. But the environment does not make the child. At best it enables the child to realize potential." (Winnicott, 1965; p. 84).

This function of the facilitating environment, clinically observed by Winnicott, is culturally embedded in some non-western cultures, like that of the Dagura people in Burkina Faso. According to animist and shaman Langston Kahn, in Dagura culture each child is welcomed into the world by parents and elders who receive them with reverence for their unique purpose. Kahn specifies,

"the purpose isn't to be a teacher, or to save the world or something. The purpose is a quality of being that

will never be seen again in the universe, in any other lifetime...And then they work to find vehicles for the expression of that essence of their soul, that quality of their being, over the course of their lifetime." (Kahn, 2024).

In other words, the child is seen as a unique contribution to the collective, and the adults play their part in facilitating the child's authentic belonging.

But this approach to child development is not how parenting was progressing in 20th century Britain. In his clinical practice, Donald Winnicott observed a dichotomy, which he called the True and False Self (Winnicott 1960). In his writing on the subject he explains that, as we grow to meet the world, everyone develops a False Self for situations that require conforming to an inauthentic norm. Winnicott realized that many of the clients who came to see him were overidentified with their False Self, and had lost their connection with any sense of a True Self. The origins of this condition, he concluded, were overbearing or over-disciplinary parents who weren't capable of leaving space for their child to come into being on their own terms.

and our collective responsibility, how might we envision a company of compassionate witnesses diminishes the power of shame. Shame thrives in hiding, where it becomes a convenient tool of oppression and collective disconnection. Therapist and author Prentis Hemphill shines a light on the network effect of reconnecting to collective forms of care:

"Our relationships can be freed some from the expectations imposed by history and oppression when they are given more room, prioritized, and centered...by making use of the knowledge of our history, using our power and position to make it safer for real things to be shared between us, we surrender to what is ultimately uncontrollable and filled with endless possibility, the terrain of relationship.  
(Hemphill, 2024; p. 93).

In most clinical models, including NARM, it is the relationship that creates the conditions of safety to risk feeling, and healing. Both Hemphill and Downes create healing spaces that defy the expectation of social alienation and reactivity embedded in the dominant culture. By learning how to extend safety to feel in relationship with one another,

of care. In NARM, the move out of chronic self-shaming and towards agency relies on “emotional completion.” This involves building our psychobiological capacity to feel what we weren’t allowed to feel towards the attachment relationships that may have failed us. Often, we don’t even realize how much we have kept ourselves from feeling, and often what we have kept ourselves from feeling are the primary emotions of anger and grief. Healing is the process of moving towards aliveness and connection, in spite of the self-rejection that may have helped us survive environmental failure in our families, or in the dominant culture.

On his work with shame in queer counseling groups, Downes summarizes,

“To really work with the shame means we get to reveal to ourselves in the company of another/others the wretchedness inside, the devastation, the unmet need, the desire, the shapes we take in the face of hatreds, the destructive aspects of ourselves that we often struggle to contain that we turn against ourselves ...Shameful disclosures with others who have had similar shamings becomes a practice of reconnecting”  
(Downes, 2022; p. 53-56).

Taking the risk to reveal “the wretchedness inside” in the

Winnicott’s False Self could be seen as a precedent to the neurobiological study of “relational trauma” or complex PTSD. The False Self, which Winnicott recognized as a dissociation between the mind and the “psyche-soma” (Winnicott 1954), corresponds to the chronic over or under activation of the nervous system, affect dysregulation, and identity distortions that characterize relational trauma. Like Winnicott’s False Self, these psychobiological patterns are a response to chronic misattunement from a caregiver, which can range from excessive projection onto the child all the way to neglect or abuse. The range produces very different outcomes but the common denominator is a shame based relationship to the self.

Clinical treatments for relational trauma recognize that as children, the attention and attunement of our caregiver is the difference between life and death. Survival depends on the reliability of this attachment relationship, so even when we experience environmental failure, we make moves internally to protect the relationship. Often our only choice under these circumstances is to turn on ourselves. According to the Neuro Affective Relational Model, which is one of two clinical somatic modalities tailored to relational trauma, there are five “core needs” that get expressed as “core capacities” when our caregivers show up for them.

In NARM these are:

<b><i>Core need &gt; Core Capacity</i></b>	
Connection	Existence (0-6 months)
Attunement	Needs (6 months-1 year)
Trust	Dependence (Toddler)
Autonomy	Independence (Toddler)
Love/Sexuality	Heart (Early Adolescence)

When these core needs aren't met by our caregivers, we reject the "core capacity," and replace it with a "survival style." For example, if our core need for connection isn't available, we may disconnect from our capacity to exist. The only survival response available in our earliest development is to shutdown and dissociate, to stop having needs. Later in life, someone with this survival style may experience having needs as a threat. When we reach toddlerhood, if the core need for autonomy isn't met, for example if our parents don't allow us to experiment with the core capacity of independence, then we reject independence. Later in life, moves towards independence manifest in our nervous system as a threat. Because some of our childhood experiences happen before language or autobiographical memory, we don't always have

have to transform the way we live into a culture that is rooted in and begins with care and not capital, disrupting neoliberal embodiments...It is an ethical practice as opposed to raising people to take part in a system that harms us with these hierarchies of value and legacies of colonialism and extraction that are brutalizing and potentially taking this particular species out" (Downes, 2022; p. 60).

In a culture built on harm and disposability, choosing to rebuild with care at the center will come with great risk. This choice threatens the foundational stratification that the ruling classes have relied on since they began forcibly disconnecting people from the land and each other, a process well documented in Silvia Federici's Caliban and the Witch. And as a social body, making this choice will depend on our capacity to look at the legacies of pain traveling through our histories, both personal and collective. This includes the way collective survival styles have been recruited to mobilize collective violence on the basis of race, gender, sexuality and class.

Reclaiming agency from the environmental failure of capitalism is a necessary step in creating a dangerous culture

emotions, or a fear of falling apart or disintegrating if there is too much feeling. People with this survival style tend to go up into the head to “figure things out” and relate to others through the intellect. Somatic abolitionist and therapist Resmaa Menakem points out that trauma, when generalized in a population, can start to look like culture (Menakem 2017). Menakem’s perspective widens the frame for viewing the Connection survival style as a collective response to a set of social conditions. When the disembodiment and dehumanization that fuels capital accumulation is reproduced in generation after generation, the relational field it produces starts to look like culture. The shame-based identifications feel “natural,” as we are encouraged to drift further and further away from our inherent connection to each other and the earth. The longer we go on without realizing the abusive nature of the systems we live in, the more we turn their abuses inward, on ourselves, each other and our children.

Robert Downes articulates a possible path forward, citing inspiration from black feminist educators and healers like Prentis Hemphill and Sonja Renee Taylor:

“I think that if we are going to transform shame, we

access to the source of these psychobiological responses. So when we brush up against our missing core capacities later in life, we experience shame, self-rejection, and self-sabotage. We find ourselves overidentified with the helplessness we felt as children, unable to change the environmental failures of our upbringing.

Like Winnicott, NARM is primarily concerned with the facilitating environment of early childhood. But there’s something mysteriously resonant about our capacity to “internalize environmental failures as personal failures” in order to survive. The myth of personal responsibility that fuels capitalism in the US, also fuels any predisposition in individuals towards self-shaming. In an interview with Jane Chance Czyzselska titled “Queer shame: notes on becoming an all-embracing mind,” therapist Robert Downes opines:

“Locating shame primarily in the mother-baby dyad I take to be problematically reductive, leaving mothers navigating a lot of shame about their parenting rather than locating the issue within a system that is actually hostile to parenting and children, a system that primarily seeks bodies that will shop and work while creating hierarchies of value and visibility, marking out some embodiments as ideals and others as more disposable” (Downes, 2022; p. 45).

The facilitating environment Downes describes is coercive, self-interested, and antagonistic to agency outside of the narrow conditions of servitude, consumption, and conformity. These are the conditions that set the terms for our survival as we move into adulthood. In order to make a living, these conditions demand we normalize violence, fear of the other, and selfishness in spite of our core need for connection.

The environmental failures we internalize from our caregivers and track into adulthood are usually reflections of our parents' unconscious, unmet needs, ie they are not passed down on purpose. The environmental failures of capitalism on the other hand, are strategic. As educator and cultural critic bell hooks explains,

"Shaming is one of the deepest tools of imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy because shame produces trauma, and trauma often produces paralysis" (hooks and Harris-Perry, 2013).

hooks points towards shame as a verb, something that the system is actively doing to keep people marginalized and frozen. Over time, this shaming produces psychobiological barriers to agency and connection in anyone who deviates from "imperialist, capitalist, white supremacist patriarchy," to use hooks' articulation of what is ultimately a toxic holding

treatment plan? Looking through an animist lens, Langston Kahn describes "mental illness" as a condition of being pulled away from the ground, and into the future or the past. In other words, when we are pulled away from presence, we become ill. Kahn explains that we always have a choice about whether or not to be grounded. Even if the choice to disconnect from the ground was made for good reasons when we were children, the earth is always available to receive us when we choose to reconnect.



When someone struggles with the Connection survival style in NARM, they may have a deep fear of feeling the body and

conditions for reconnection to the Self...Given the right conditions of support, we trust that individuals will reconnect to their spontaneous movement toward connection, health, and aliveness."

In a clinical context, the safety of the therapeutic relationship creates the conditions for our autonomous self-healing instincts to come alive. But when we step out of the clinic, we are blasted once again with the shame-inducing social conditions of the broader facilitating environment. As a developmental model, NARM defines survival styles up to adolescence, and doesn't explicitly speak to the wider developmental consequences of a culture that uses shame to divide and undermine its population. This transformation in the focus of healing is left to the fringes of the psychological establishment.

In a lecture series called "When Healing Becomes Ill," Bayo Akomalafe introduces the Yoruban concept that when someone in the village is mentally ill, the village must consider how well they are doing as a collective. The individual is understood as a reflection of the whole. If we were to acknowledge the epidemic of "mental illness" and trauma in the US as a reflection of our collective well being,

environment for adults. This omnipresent threat and manufactured scarcity push us, vulnerable and privileged, into presumed or enforced helplessness as adults. When we find a common struggle and break through these life-limiting conditions, the system relies on our material precarity and shame based identifications to turn us against ourselves and one another.

If we zoom back into the clinic and imagine ourselves as clients, a NARM therapist would be helping us track moments of connection and disconnection from ourselves. The work is iterative, because the adaptative, shame based identifications that disconnect us from ourselves still connect us to our early attachment relationships. This is a process of learning how our inner world is organized in relation to the environmental failure of our childhood. As we begin recognizing and connecting our child consciousness to our adult consciousness, we discover our agency in the present time. As adults we can choose whether to continue "shaming ourselves" on the basis of the past.

This healing process can only happen, however, under the right conditions, conditions we were likely denied in childhood. According to the NARM training manual, "NARM-informed professionals create the therapeutic