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# **The Risked Word**

*Five Concepts*

*for a Phenomenology of Intimate Interpellation*

*Collection The Interpellation of the World*

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*"Confession is a word that turns against itself,  
that takes the risk of betraying itself in order to find itself."*

*Jérôme Porée, Phenomenology of Confession, Vrin, 2022*

*"Every being exists insofar as it is interpellated, responds,  
and resonates."*

*Christian Mahoukou, The Phenomenological Law of Interpellation*

## Preliminary Not

### *What This Volume Owes to Porée — and What It Adds*

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#### I. Porée and Confession — What Has Been Accomplished

There are books that do what they promise. Jérôme Porée's *Phenomenology of Confession* is one of them.<sup>1</sup> Its ambition was considerable: to gather under a unified phenomenological description a phenomenon that contemporary thought had left in a state of juxtaposed disciplinary fragments — the confession of law, the confession of theology, the symptom of psychoanalysis, the practice of subjectivation in sociology. Porée accomplishes this unification with a rigour that commands respect.

The eidetic structure he identifies is solid: confession is always a self-referential speech act by which a subject attributes to himself a state, an action, or a truth concerning himself, in a relation of presence to another that engages his existence.<sup>2</sup>

The analysis of the triple temporality of confession is the most original contribution of the work. Porée shows that confession articulates three irreducible dimensions: the confessed past, the present of the act of confessing, and the future that this act opens or closes.<sup>3</sup> This tripartite structure is not a chronological sequence — it is a configuration in which each dimension reconfigures the other two.

The response to the Foucauldian suspicion is philosophically decisive.<sup>4</sup> Foucault had shown that confession is a technology of power. Porée does not dismiss this suspicion: he reverses it. The Foucauldian critique only bears on the degraded or coerced forms of confession. It presupposes, in order to be intelligible, the existence of an authentic confession of which it describes the perversion.

Finally, the diagnosis on contemporary 'guilty innocence' — the claim to a self-transparency that would dispense with any confession, any debt to the other or to the past — constitutes a courageous and highly pertinent contribution. We have read Porée with care. It is from this recognition that this volume takes its departure.

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<sup>1</sup>Jérôme Porée, *Phénoménologie de l'aveu*, Paris, Vrin, 2022. All references to Porée in this volume refer to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Porée, *op. cit.*, pp. 17–23: 'Confession as a singular speech act — its illocutionary structure and performative dimension.' Porée's definition engages productively with Austin's theory of speech acts: J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1962.

<sup>3</sup> Porée, *op. cit.*, pp. 45–58. This analysis enters into productive dialogue with Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. I, trans. K. McLaughlin & D. Pellauer, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984, and his phenomenology of narrative time.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. A. Sheridan, New York, Pantheon, 1977, pp. 185–208; and *The History of Sexuality*, vol. I: *The Will to Knowledge*, trans. R. Hurley, New York, Pantheon, 1978, pp. 78–98. Porée's response: *op. cit.*, pp. 155–170.

## II. What Porée Leaves Open

Every accomplished philosophical work is also, by that very fact, the outline of a programme the author did not have the time or intention to execute. This is the mark of great contributions: they open more than they close.

The intersubjective dimension of confession is acknowledged but not formalised. Porée sees clearly that confession implies the presence of a witness, that the confession-forgiveness dialectic is at the heart of its structure. But he does not formalise the relation between the one who confesses and the witness in a necessary and sufficient structure. This is precisely the gap that the Mahoukou Law will fill.

Forgiveness remains insufficiently thematised in its own structure. Contemporary forms of digital confession are not addressed. And the immanent normativity of authentic confession remains at the level of a guiding intuition – something that the Mahoukou Law will allow us to formulate with the rigour of an eidetic structure.

## III. Intimate Interpellation – Why Confession Is the Most Revealing Terrain

The Phenomenological Law of Interpellation – known as the Mahoukou Law – has been developed in the previous volumes of this collection.<sup>5</sup> Confession constitutes a terrain of a different nature and of unparalleled revelation. It is the terrain of what we call here intimate interpellation: an interpellation in which the entire triadic structure is laid bare, without mediation, in the most exposed and most vulnerable zone of human existence.

### ◆ *Intimate Interpellation – A New Syntagm*

*The syntagm 'intimate interpellation' is coined in this volume to designate a specific type of interpellation that the previous volumes of the collection had not yet thematised as such. In those volumes, the Mahoukou Law was applied to broad domains: aesthetic experience, the ambivalences of Husserlian phenomenology, environmental humanism, social time, captivity. In all these cases, interpellation was analysed from large-scale structures – cultural, institutional, existential.*

*Confession changes the scale. It descends into the most exposed zone of existence – the zone where the human being turns against himself, exposes himself in his weakness, risks his most intimate truth. Interpellation is intimate here not because it is private or secret – it may be entirely public – but because it engages the constitutive intimacy of the subject: what he is beyond what he shows.*

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<sup>5</sup> For a full presentation of the Mahoukou Law and the Call–Response–Resonance triad, see C. Mahoukou, *Epistemological Foundations of the A2R Triad and Operability of the Mahoukou Law* (Vol. I of the present collection, 2026); and Volumes II through VI of the same collection. All available at [www.christianmahoukou.com](http://www.christianmahoukou.com)

#### IV. The Five Concepts — A System, Not a List

**Confession Without a Recipient** designates the situation in which the act of confessing is accomplished but no subject capable of receiving the Call is available. It is the radical form of dialogal impediment at the first moment of the triad.

**Pardon-Resonance** is the positive resolution of what confession without a recipient makes visible by default — the most fully accomplished form of forgiveness, as an event of reciprocal transformation.

**The Debt of Resonance** is the normative counterpart of Pardon-Resonance: the phenomenological obligation of active reception that the witness contracts in receiving the risked word.

**The Totalitarian Confession** is the institutional perversion of the triadic structure — its most elaborated anti-figure, which summons the Call in order to annihilate it.

**The Digital Confession** is the contemporary figure of confession without a recipient — its hypermodern, massive, and invisible-as-such version.

These five concepts form a system because they call upon one another. Pardon-Resonance is the positive resolution of confession without a recipient. The Debt of Resonance is the normative counterpart of Pardon-Resonance. The totalitarian confession destroys what the Debt of Resonance formalises. The digital confession is the contemporary version of confession without a recipient. Reading one without the others is possible. Reading them together reveals an architecture that the separate parts do not show.

#### V. The Horizon — Three Open Sites of Research

This volume opens three sites of research: a clinical phenomenology of confession, a political phenomenology of confession, and a digital phenomenology of confession. These sites will be thematised in the prospective conclusion. Each chapter illuminates them from within its own concept.

#### VI. To Whom This Volume Is Addressed

This volume is a work of philosophy. But it does not address philosophers alone. It addresses anyone who has found themselves — or will find themselves — in the position of witness to a risked word. And this position, all the world's cultures know it, under different names and in different frameworks, since human beings have spoken and confessed to one another.

To the magistrate who receives a confession in court. To the confessor — whether officiating in a church, a mosque, a temple, or around a bush fire. To the mediator. To the teacher and the educator. To the caregiver. To anyone invested with moral authority in any culture in the world. And finally — perhaps above all — to any human being in the course of ordinary life.

To all these people, this volume says one simple thing: what happens in those moments has a structure. That structure can be understood. And that understanding changes something.

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*This volume owes to Porée its point of departure and its terrain. The Mahoukou Law brings what Porée sought without being able to produce alone. And in return, confession offers the Mahoukou Law its most intimate and most revealing application.*

*The risked word. This is where we enter.*

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*"Philosophy, when it is truly alive, does not comment on the world. It interpellates it.  
This volume would like to be one of those."*

# Confession Without a Recipient

*When the Risked Word Has Nowhere to Go*

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## I. The Paradox

There is a situation we find difficult to imagine — not because it is rare, but because it is unbearable to contemplate. The situation of a human being who takes the risk of saying something true about himself — who gathers the necessary courage, who finds the words, who exposes himself — and who discovers that his word has nowhere to go.

This is not the same as speaking into a void. Speaking into a void is the absence of a recipient. Confession without a recipient is something more complex and more painful: the situation in which the act of confessing is accomplished — the word is spoken, the risk is taken — but the triadic structure that should open remains closed. The Call is launched. But it finds no dialogal space in which to unfold.

This return is a particular form of violence. Not physical violence — the violence of that which cannot exist. For authentic confession exists fully only in relation to a recipient capable of receiving it. Confession without a recipient is an incomplete, suspended existence, which wounds twice: first in the fact of being unable to be deposited, and second in the fact of having to be reabsorbed by the one who emitted it — with all the weight of what it carried.

## II. The Forms of Confession Without a Recipient

### 1. Isolation — When There Is No One

The most immediately visible form of confession without a recipient is that of radical isolation: there is simply no one. No human presence available, no institutional or communal framework in which to inscribe the word.

The prisoner in solitary confinement. Lisa Guenther has shown, in a rigorous phenomenology, that solitary confinement progressively destroys the prisoner's lived world — his perception of space, time, others, and himself.<sup>6</sup> What Guenther describes as destruction

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<sup>6</sup> Lisa Guenther, *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and its Afterlives*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2013. Guenther mobilises Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas to show how solitary confinement destroys the very structure of intersubjectivity.

of the lived world, the Mahoukou Law can specify: it is above all and fundamentally a destruction of the possibility of the Call.

The exile whose community has disappeared often carries things to say that can only be received by those who share a certain common background of experience. And those people are no longer there. He may find well-meaning people, open ears — but not recipients in the full sense. For the recipient of a confession is not merely someone who listens: he is someone who can receive.

◆ **Physical Isolation and Symbolic Isolation — Two Distinct Forms**

*Confession without a recipient takes two forms that must be distinguished, because they call for different responses. Physical isolation is the situation in which no human presence is available — the dying person alone, the prisoner, the exile without community. The response to this form involves creating presences: companions, visitors, support structures.*

*Symbolic isolation is more insidious: the recipient is physically present, but the shared symbolic framework that would allow the word to be received is absent or destroyed. The genocide survivor speaking to someone who has not lived what he experienced, the exile whose language is not that of his interlocutor, the victim whose experience is not culturally recognised as experience — all are in symbolic isolation. The response to this form requires not only a presence but the construction of a shared symbolic space. This is longer, more difficult work, and cannot be accomplished in urgency.*

## 2. The Denial of Legitimacy — When You Are Placed on the Side of the Lie

There is a form of confession without a recipient that is perhaps more painful still than isolation — because it is more perverse. The recipient is there. He hears. And he denies.

To deny does not simply mean not to believe. To deny, in the sense we intend here, is to refuse the one who confesses the very right to occupy the position of the one who speaks. It is to place him, definitively and without appeal, on the side of the lie — not because the facts are contestable, but because the word of this particular being cannot, structurally, count.

*Symbolic erasure is often more devastating than contradiction. You can fight against someone who says you are wrong. You cannot fight against someone who says you have no voice.*

## 3. Judicial Suspicion — When Truth Is Treated as Strategy

The judicial framework offers a case study of particular sophistication: the confession suspected of being strategic. True words treated as calculated lies. This paradox is of remarkable phenomenological cruelty. The one who confesses finds himself in a situation without escape: whatever he does, his word will be interpreted from a grid that precedes and determines it.

#### 4. The Child's Confession — The Most Unbearable Figure

We must stop here. Really stop. Because what we are about to describe is the most radical form of confession without a recipient — and perhaps the most frequent in its long-term effects on human lives.

The abused child is structurally in the most disarmed position of all when it comes to confession. He has the fewest linguistic resources to name what has happened to him. He has the least social authority to compel listening. He depends, for his material and emotional survival, on the same people who have hurt him or who have an interest in not hearing.

When this child tries to speak, he often gives signs, attempts oblique approaches. This oblique approach is not cowardice — it is an intuitive wisdom of confession: one only risks the full word if one has first verified that the ground is there. And too often, the ground is not there.

This conclusion, inscribed in a child's body and psyche, can structure an entire existence: I am one of those whose word does not count. And when, years later, this person tries to speak again, they arrive with this inscribed certainty. The first thing any worthy recipient must do is undo this certainty before the word can even be spoken.

#### 5. The Deferred Confession — The Weight of an Entire Life

Some confessions wait for years. Sometimes decades. Sometimes an entire life. The deferred confession is not simply a late confession. It is a confession that has been carried — alone, in silence, in body and psyche — for a time whose very duration testifies to the impossibility that presented itself when it should have been able to be said.

The phenomenology of this deferred confession resonates with what Proust describes with involuntary memory: the moment when the word can finally come is not always chosen.<sup>7</sup> It arrives — triggered by an encounter, an image, an event that breaks the dam. And when it arrives, it may overflow — not because the one who confesses is weak, but because what comes is not only the word of the present; it is the accumulation of all the years during which this word could not be said.

#### 6. Symbolic Collapse — When Words Themselves Fail

Survivors of extreme traumas often describe an experience that Primo Levi named with unbearable lucidity<sup>8</sup>: ordinary language was not made for these experiences. And to use ordinary language to say them is sometimes to betray them as much as to silence them. For

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<sup>7</sup> Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. VII: *Time Regained*, trans. A. Mayor & T. Kilmartin, New York, Random House, 1993. Proustian involuntary memory — triggered by a sensation — offers a phenomenological analogy with the deferred confession: in both cases, what returns is not a representation of the past but the past itself, in all its existential density.

<sup>8</sup> Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man*, trans. S. Woolf, London, Orion Press, 1959 [1947]; and *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. R. Rosenthal, New York, Summit Books, 1988. On impossible testimony, see also Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen, New York, Zone Books, 1999.

the Mahoukou Law, this symbolic collapse is a radical figure of confession without a recipient: the Call wants to be formulated, but the words that would allow it to do so do not yet exist.

### III. What Confession Without a Recipient Reveals

These six figures reveal, by contrast and by default, what is necessary for authentic confession to be possible. The first condition is the recipient's availability — not his physical presence, but his existential availability. The second is recognition of the legitimacy of the word. The third is the existence of a shared symbolic framework in which words have a common meaning.

### IV. Resistance — Creating a Recipient Where There Is None

Human beings, in all cultures and in all epochs, have invented ways of creating a recipient where there was none. The letter written to no one. The journal. The ritual. The friend who stays. These forms do not replace the authentic recipient — but they keep alive the possibility of the word. And this is perhaps the most important lesson of this first concept: confession without a recipient reveals the extraordinary tenacity with which human beings seek to create recipients for themselves — to keep alive, against all odds, the possibility of the risked word.

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*The next chapter explores the positive resolution of what the first described by default. If confession without a recipient is the blocked structure, Pardon-Resonance is its most fully accomplished form.*

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## Pardon-Resonance

*When the Response Transforms Both*

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### I. Ordinary Forgiveness and Its Insufficiencies

We all know what the word forgiveness designates in everyday language. It designates the act by which someone decides to hold no more grudge against another for what he has done. This kind of forgiveness has its value. We are not seeking to deny it. But we want to show that it does not yet constitute what this chapter seeks to think.

Ordinary forgiveness is fundamentally a unilateral act. It proceeds from one subject, the forgiver, toward another, the forgiven. And this asymmetry is not a defect — it is the very structure of ordinary forgiveness. What limits this forgiveness is precisely this asymmetry: it can be accomplished without anything changing in the relation between the two subjects. Forgiveness has occurred. The encounter, perhaps, not yet.

### II. Dialogue with Ricœur and Arendt — What They Accomplished and What Remains Open

#### Ricœur: Dissociating the Act from the Agent

Paul Ricœur devoted the final pages of *Memory, History, Forgetting* to what he calls difficult forgiveness.<sup>9</sup> Ricœur's decisive contribution is the distinction between the act and the agent. One cannot forgive an act — the act has occurred, it is irreversible. One can only forgive the agent — the person who committed the act, by distinguishing him from it. Forgiveness says: you are more than what you have done.

But Ricœur stops there. He does not describe what forgiveness does to the one who forgives — the transformation of the forgiver himself remains outside his analysis. This is precisely where Pardon-Resonance brings something Ricœur did not formalise.

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<sup>9</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. K. Blamey & D. Pellauer, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004, pp. 457–506: 'Difficult Forgiveness.' Ricœur engages notably with Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness*, trans. A. Kelley, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005.

## **Arendt: Releasing the Irreversible**

Hannah Arendt, in *The Human Condition*, approaches forgiveness from a different angle — political and existential.<sup>10</sup> For Arendt, forgiveness is one of the two great human faculties that allow us not to be crushed by the past. Arendt's formulation is memorable: only forgiveness can release what action has bound. But Arendt, too, stops short of what we seek to formalise. She does not describe what happens in the forgiver at the moment of forgiving.

Jacques Derrida pushed reflection on forgiveness to its limit: unconditional forgiveness.<sup>11</sup> Derrida maintains that authentic forgiveness must be granted to the unforgivable. The Mahoukou Law enters into critical dialogue with Derrida here: Pardon-Resonance is not unconditional — it is conditioned by the triadic structure, by the presence of an authentic Call and an engaged Response. Forgiveness without interpellative structure is not a purer forgiveness — it is a forgiveness without body.

## **III. Pardon-Resonance — What Really Happens**

Let us begin with an experience many of us have had. The moment when one truly forgives someone. This moment has a particular phenomenological quality: not the lightness of relief — the relief of having resolved a problem — but something deeper and stranger: an enlargement. The feeling that something has opened — in oneself, in the space between oneself and the other. A transformation that was not planned, that arrives as a gift.

### **Resonance on the Side of the One Who Confessed**

On the side of the one who confessed, Pardon-Resonance accomplishes a reconfiguration of narrative identity. The agent, released from his act, discovers he can tell himself differently. The act remains — in memory, in its consequences. But it no longer constitutes the centre of gravity around which everything is organised. And this liberation has a bodily dimension that the philosophy of forgiveness rarely mentions: something that was carried in the body, that tensed the shoulders, is deposited.

### **Resonance on the Side of the Forgiver**

It is here that Pardon-Resonance brings its most original and least expected contribution. In truly forgiving — not deciding to forgive, but truly forgiving — the forgiver discovers he is capable of something he did not yet know he was capable of. Capable of holding simultaneously in his gaze both the fault and the person at fault. This discovery enlarges the forgiver irreversibly.

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<sup>10</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958, pp. 236–247: 'Irreversibility and the Power to Forgive.'

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'On Forgiveness,' in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. M. Dooley & M. Hughes, London, Routledge, 2001.

*The one who truly forgives does not return to the point where he was before the fault. He arrives somewhere he has never been.*

## Reciprocal Transformation as Criterion

Pardon-Resonance is distinguished from all its degraded forms by a single and precise criterion: reciprocal transformation. Both subjects present leave the event differently than they entered it, irreversibly. This criterion is demanding. It says that forgiveness is rare — not impossible, but rare. And that it cannot be produced on demand, guaranteed by procedure, or extorted by social or institutional pressure.

### ◆ *Deciding to Forgive and Truly Forgiving — The Temporality of Pardon-Resonance*

*There is a crucial distinction, often ignored in discussions of forgiveness, between the decision to forgive and accomplished forgiveness. The decision to forgive may be sincere, courageous, immediate. But Pardon-Resonance does not necessarily coincide with the moment of this decision.*

*Pardon-Resonance arrives — or it does not. And when it arrives, it is often after the decision has been made, in an unexpected moment, triggered by a gesture, a conversation, a glance. This deferred temporality does not invalidate the prior decision — it is its soil of preparation. To decide to forgive is to create the conditions in which Pardon-Resonance may come to pass. But it is not yet the forgiving.*

*This distinction has important practical consequences: someone who has decided to forgive and who still finds himself inhabited by anger or pain should not conclude that he has failed or was acting in bad faith. He is simply in the interval between decision and accomplishment — an interval that may last weeks, months, sometimes years.*

## IV. The Degraded Forms of Forgiveness

### Administrative Clemency

Administrative clemency — presidential pardon, political amnesty, absolution granted by routine — fulfils an indispensable social and juridical function. But it would be dangerous to confuse it with Pardon-Resonance: it legally closes without the interpellative structure of reconciliation having been able to accomplish itself.

### Routine Absolution

Routine absolution is the most widespread degraded form of forgiveness in institutional spaces devoted to confession. The confessor who absolves out of professional habit. The therapist who validates without being present. These figures are not necessarily acting in bad faith — they are often exhausted, defended by years of exposure to the suffering of others.

But the phenomenological result is the same: the confessing word arrives in a space where it finds no true recipient.

### Forgiveness Granted Too Quickly

Precipitate forgiveness short-circuits the process by which Pardon-Resonance can come to pass. It can be recognised by this: a few weeks or months later, what one thought one had forgiven returns — in the form of resentment, bitterness. Not because one was acting in bad faith, but because Pardon-Resonance was not yet possible. The ground was not yet ready.

### Impossible Forgiveness

There are finally situations in which Pardon-Resonance is out of reach. Elie Wiesel said, regarding the Shoah, that he had no right to forgive on behalf of the dead.<sup>12</sup> This was not rancour — it was a phenomenological and moral lucidity of great precision. Forgiveness belongs to the one who was hurt. It cannot be delegated, granted by proxy, or demanded in the name of a social or political reconciliation that the victims have not decided upon.

## V. Pardon-Resonance in Everyday Life

This concept does not live only in the great historical reconciliations. It lives between two friends after a betrayal, between a parent and a child, between two colleagues. Pardon-Resonance in everyday life is not spectacular. It arrives in ordinary moments — a quiet conversation, a glance that lasts a little longer than usual. It requires no staging. It requires presence.

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*This chapter has described forgiveness in its most fully accomplished form. The next explores the normative counterpart of this forgiveness: the debt the witness contracts in receiving the risked word.*

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<sup>12</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. M. Wiesel, New York, Hill & Wang, 2006 [1958]. The question of impossible forgiveness after the Shoah was also raised by Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*, New York, Schocken, 1997.

## The Debt of Resonance

*What the Witness Owes to the Word He Receives*

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### I. A Debt Without a Visible Creditor

When someone takes the risk of the confessing word, he creates something in the space between himself and the witness: an asymmetry. And this asymmetry calls for a reciprocity. This reciprocity is not legally enforceable. It is not institutionally guaranteed. And yet it is real. And its absence is a real wound — sometimes more lasting than the wound the confession sought to heal.

This is what we call the Debt of Resonance: a norm inscribed in the very structure of the interpellative event. An immanent norm: it comes from the phenomenon itself, not from a superimposed rule.

### II. The Immanent Norm — What the Structure Requires

#### Levinas and the Call of the Face

Emmanuel Levinas devoted a great part of his work to describing something akin to what we seek to formalise.<sup>13</sup> Levinas says: the face of the other is a call. When I encounter the face of the other, I am called into question — placed before a demand that precedes any decision on my part. Responsibility toward the other, for Levinas, is prior to freedom — it is the very structure of subjectivity.

What Levinas sees with incomparable depth is the unilateral and absolute character of this responsibility. But it is precisely here that the Mahoukou Law adds something: the Debt of Resonance is not an absolute and unilateral responsibility — it is a structural requirement inscribed in a precise event. It is not infinite — it is proportionate to the Call received.

#### The Structure of the Debt

The Debt of Resonance has three components. The debt of reception: to receive what comes without deflecting it, minimising it, or turning it against the one who spoke. The debt of

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<sup>13</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1981; and *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. A. Lingis, Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1969. The notion of the 'face' (le visage) as an irresistible ethical call is central to Levinas's entire work.

presence: to be genuinely there — not only physically but existentially. The debt of possible transformation: to leave open in oneself the possibility of being changed by what one hears.

#### ◆ *Obligation of Result and Obligation of Availability*

*The formulation in the blockquote of this chapter deserves development: 'The Debt of Resonance is not an obligation of result — it is an obligation of availability.'*

*An obligation of result would impose reaching a defined state: the witness should be transformed, forgiveness should occur, Resonance should happen. Such an obligation would be phenomenologically impossible to guarantee — Resonance cannot be commanded. No one can decree that he will be transformed by what he hears.*

*An obligation of availability is of a different nature: it imposes creating and maintaining the conditions in which transformation is possible. It requires the suspension of prior defences, the patience of silence, active openness to what comes. This availability can be cultivated, learned, worked on. It is demanding — but it is accessible. This is why the Debt of Resonance is a real norm, not an inaccessible ideal.*

### III. The Figures of Failing

The Debt of Resonance is so rarely named that those who fail it almost always do so without realising it. Not from bad will — from structural ignorance.

#### The Distracted Witness

The most common form of failing the Debt of Resonance is distraction. The recipient is physically present, he hears the words, he may even be able to repeat their content. But he is not there. In the digital age, distraction has taken new forms: the phone placed on the table that vibrates, the eye that slides toward the screen. These gestures — normalised, made invisible — are forms of failing the Debt of Resonance.

#### The Witness Who Advises Rather Than Listens

The precipitate move to advice betrays something important: the recipient cannot bear to remain in the discomfort of the word received. In proposing a solution, he places himself back in an active, controlled role. But in doing so, he fails the Debt of Resonance. What the one who risked the word needs is to be heard — not to be advised.

#### The Witness Who Relativises

Relativisation cancels the risked word. It says, without saying it explicitly: what you have entrusted to me does not merit the weight you give it. But the risked word is not a report on

the state of the world — it is an exposure of the self. And the exposure of the self is not to be relativised.

### **The Witness Who Turns the Word Against Its Speaker**

The most wounding form of failing the Debt of Resonance is reversal: what was entrusted in confidence is used against the one who said it. This wound is particular because it doubles the betrayal: betrayal of the risked word, and betrayal of the relation in which that word was spoken.

### **The Penitential Rite — An Immanent Norm Inscribed in Liturgical Structure**

The penitential rite of Catholic liturgy offers an example of particular richness.<sup>14</sup> At the beginning of the Mass, the faithful pronounce the Confiteor — this collective confession, addressed to God and to the community: 'I confess to almighty God and to you, my brothers and sisters...' At the end of the rite, the priest pronounces the formula: 'May almighty God have mercy on you, forgive your sins, and bring you to everlasting life.' And the assembly responds: Amen.

What is remarkable, from the perspective of the Mahoukou Law, is the position of the priest. He is not the forgiver — he is a mediator. He does not grant forgiveness in his own name: he opens a space toward an Other who forgives. And in pronouncing this formula, he himself contracts a Debt of Resonance toward what he says. The difference between the living rite and the routine rite passes precisely through this: the celebrant who truly honours the Debt of Resonance creates a space. The one who recites without engagement empties it.

## **IV. The Debt of Resonance in Institutions**

### **Professional Burnout as Repeated Failure**

Professional burnout syndrome in listening professions is generally described in terms of work overload and loss of meaning.<sup>15</sup> But the Mahoukou Law allows us to name more precisely what is happening: these professionals receive risked words daily, contracting each time a Debt of Resonance. If they lack the resources to honour it, they must simulate Resonance. And this simulation costs — enormously, over time.

### **Institutional Dehumanisation**

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<sup>14</sup> Roman Missal, Penitential Act, Form A (Confiteor). The penitential rite was reformed by the Second Vatican Council (Sacrosanctum Concilium, 1963) and codified in the Roman Missal of Paul VI (1969). The collective absolution formula pronounced by the priest is theologically distinct from the sacramental individual absolution granted in confession — a distinction that is theologically important but phenomenologically fertile for our purposes.

<sup>15</sup> On compassion fatigue in listening professions, see Charles Figley (ed.), *Compassion Fatigue: Coping with Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder in Those who Treat the Traumatized*, New York, Brunner/Mazel, 1995; and Christina Maslach, *Burnout: The Cost of Caring*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1982.

The hospital where the physician has seven minutes per patient. The court where the judge renders hundreds of decisions a year. The school where the teacher faces thirty students. These situations are not the result of the bad will of those who live them — they are the result of institutional choices that ignore the Debt of Resonance as a structural reality. And the result is twofold: those who come with their risked word find no recipient in the full sense; and those who work there are progressively damaged in their capacity to be present.

## V. Honouring the Debt — What It Concretely Requires

The Debt of Resonance is not paid with techniques. What is first required is suspension — setting aside one's own preoccupations, prior judgements. What is required next is the patience of silence — letting what has just been said have time to exist before responding. What is required further is acceptance of the risk of being changed. And finally, discretion — what was entrusted in the space of confession belongs to that space.

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*The next chapter explores the institutional destruction of this debt — no longer through negligence, but through deliberate decision. The totalitarian confession is the most elaborated perversion of the interpellative structure.*

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# The Totalitarian Confession

*The Perfect Simulation of Interpellation*

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## I. What Totalitarianism Does to Confession

There are perversions that are coarse — visible, immediately identifiable as such. And there are perversions that are sophisticated — that borrow the forms of what they destroy in order to destroy it from within. The totalitarian confession belongs to the second category. It is a perversion of the interpellative structure that is all the more formidable because it preserves all the appearances.

### The Destruction of the Call

The totalitarian institution summons confession. It creates conditions in which not confessing becomes impossible. It produces the appearance of a Call while destroying the freedom that constitutes it. What is extracted is not a Call: it is the imitation of a Call produced under constraint. And the institution knows this — it is precisely the heart of its strategy. It does not need the truth of the confession. It needs the form of the confession.

### The Destruction of the Response

The totalitarian institution determines the Response in advance. Before the confession is made, the conclusion is already written. What takes place between the Call and the Response is not listening — it is a procedure for validating a result decided beforehand.

### The Destruction of Resonance

The institution cannot be transformed by what it hears — because it has decided in advance not to be. The totalitarian confession is therefore, in the vocabulary of the Mahoukou Law, a phenomenological anti-confession: it has all the appearances of confession without any of its structures.

## II. Historical Figures

### The Moscow Trials

The Moscow Trials of 1936–1938 constitute the most elaborate and most analysed historical example of totalitarian confession.<sup>16</sup> Leading Bolshevik figures — Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin, Rykov — rose before Soviet tribunals to confess crimes they had not committed. These confessions were detailed, circumstantiated, pronounced with apparent conviction. And they were false.

### The Cultural Revolution

The Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) produced another figure of totalitarian confession — different in form but identical in its phenomenological structure.<sup>17</sup> The criticism and self-criticism sessions brought hundreds of people together around an accused who had to publicly confess his ideological errors. What is remarkable is its communal dimension: the community itself was transformed into an instrument of power.

### Contemporary Authoritarian Regimes

The totalitarian confession is not a superseded historical figure. The televised confessions broadcast in some contemporary authoritarian regimes — where journalists, activists, and foreign businessmen recite manifestly prepared formulas — are contemporary forms of the totalitarian confession. The phenomenological structure is identical: a coerced Call, a predetermined Response, an impossible Resonance.

## III. The Contemporary Figure — The Sincere Confession That Turns Against Itself

There is a figure of the totalitarian confession that occurs not in overtly authoritarian regimes but in judicial systems that present themselves as democratic. Someone makes the courageous decision to tell the whole truth. And he discovers that this confession condemns him — not because the truth justifies a disproportionate condemnation, but because, in the system in which he finds himself, the complete confession is turned against him.

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990; and Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*, trans. D. Hardy, New York, Macmillan, 1941. Koestler describes from the inside the logic of the totalitarian confession through the character of Rubashov — a composite figure inspired by Bukharin and Radek.

<sup>17</sup> Jean-Luc Domenach, *Chine: l'archipel oublié*, Paris, Fayard, 1992; and Simon Leys (Pierre Ryckmans), *The Chairman's New Clothes: Mao and the Cultural Revolution*, trans. C. EST-heimer & S. Stone, London, Allison & Busby, 1977. On the struggle sessions (*dou zheng*), see also Nien Cheng, *Life and Death in Shanghai*, New York, Grove Press, 1986.

## The Trap of the Definitive Confession

Some judicial systems require the definitive confession as a condition of the procedure. This requirement produces a phenomenological trap: the one who confesses knows he cannot go back if his truth is poorly received. His word, once pronounced and recorded, belongs to the system — it will be used according to a logic that is not that of truth but that of procedure.

*When a judicial system transforms sincerity into vulnerability, it does not produce more truth — it produces fewer authentic confessions. And it instructs subjects to distrust their own word.*

### ◆ *Confession Extracted by Torture and Confession Produced by Procedural Logic*

*It is important to distinguish two forms of constraint that produce inauthentic confessions, because they call for different responses.*

*The confession extracted by torture is visible in its physical and psychological marks. It is condemned by international law and recognised as inadmissible in most contemporary legal systems, at least in principle. Its perversion is coarse — it shows.*

*The confession produced by procedural logic is more difficult to identify and correct. It has no visible marks of constraint — it has the appearance of choice. It is produced by the convergence of rational rules that, applied mechanically, create structural incentives not to tell the truth. Reforming this type of confession requires not eliminating illegal practices but rethinking legal institutional logics — a far more difficult task, which requires precisely the phenomenological formalisation this volume seeks to provide.*

## The Plurality of Systems — A Universal Question

This tension between the sincere confession and the system that receives it cuts across all judicial systems. In common law systems, the *plea bargain* transforms confession into an instrument of transaction.<sup>18</sup> In inquisitorial systems, the trust granted to confession as the queen of proofs has historically produced abuses. In customary systems of many cultures, confession is inscribed in communal structures that give it a different value and function.

## IV. Coerced Confession — Between Law and Phenomenology

### The Right to Silence as Phenomenological Protection

The right to silence — enshrined notably in the form of the Miranda warning in the United States<sup>19</sup> and the right against self-incrimination in European law — is generally presented as

<sup>18</sup> The plea bargain is a procedure of American criminal law by which the accused pleads guilty in exchange for a reduced sentence or reduction of charges. It accounts for more than 90% of criminal convictions in the United States. See Stephanos Bibas, *The Machinery of Criminal Justice*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> *Miranda v. Arizona*, 384 U.S. 436 (1966): Supreme Court ruling establishing the obligation to inform suspects of their rights before any interrogation. In European law: European Convention on Human Rights, Article 6 (right to a fair trial), interpreted by the European Court of Human Rights as including the right to silence.

a legal protection against forced confessions. True. But it is also, from the perspective of the Mahoukou Law, something deeper: a phenomenological protection of the structure of authentic confession. It says implicitly: confession is only valid if it is free.

## **The Tension Between Truth and Procedure**

The totalitarian confession, in its most sophisticated form, exploits the tension between the search for truth and the logic of procedure. It does not need to be extracted by torture — it can be produced by procedural logic itself. When someone understands that telling the truth exposes him more than silence, he is in a situation that produces the same effects as physical constraint.

## **V. Resistance — Maintaining the Truth of Confession in a System That Perverts It**

### **Those Who Refused**

Some refused to sign — maintaining silence or denial at the price of their freedom, sometimes their lives.<sup>20</sup> This refusal maintained something the system could not manufacture: a free word.

### **Those Who Maintained Their Sincere Confession Against the Opposite Pressure**

There is a symmetrical and less often celebrated figure: those who, after having sincerely confessed, maintained their confession despite pressure to retract it. The conviction that the truth they had spoken belonged to them, and that withdrawing it would have been a betrayal of themselves more grave than the coming condemnation.

### **The Oblique Forms of Truth**

Between total refusal and complete confession, human beings have sought to keep truth alive in systems that perverted it: the letter slipped into the margins of an official document, the double meaning cultivated in a word spoken before witnesses, the deliberate silence on certain facts and the deliberate word on others.

### **What Resistance Reveals**

These figures of resistance reveal what the totalitarian confession seeks to destroy. Not only the truth of the facts — but the subjectivity of the one who speaks, his capacity to be the

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<sup>20</sup> Andrei Sakharov (1921–1989): Soviet physicist, father of the Soviet hydrogen bomb, who became the USSR's leading human rights defender. Nobel Peace Prize 1975. Exiled to Gorky (1980–1986). See his *Memoirs*, trans. R. Lourie, New York, Knopf, 1990. Nelson Mandela (1918–2013): imprisoned for 27 years on Robben Island, refused all conditional release offers that would have required him to renounce the armed struggle. President of South Africa (1994–1999).

author of his own word. Those who resist maintain this subjectivity alive. This is the most fundamental form of human dignity in the face of totalitarian power.

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*The final chapter explores the most massive and least visible contemporary figure of confession without authentic structure: the digital confession.*

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# The Digital Confession

*Intensity Without Depth*

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## I. Public Confession as a New Norm

Jérôme Porée published his *Phenomenology of Confession* in 2022 — at the height of the explosion in practices of self-exposure on digital platforms. And yet this territory is absent from his work. This chapter explores the territory Porée left entire.

Some figures to measure the scope of the phenomenon.<sup>21</sup> Tens of millions of Instagram stories published daily, a significant proportion of which contain personal revelations. Millions of threads in which people recount traumatic experiences. Entire communities on Reddit devoted to anonymous confession. TikTok has produced the genre of viral testimony. This is not a marginal phenomenon. It is an anthropological mutation in the practice of confession — the fastest and most massive humanity has ever known.

## II. The Destruction of the Call — Address to No One

The Call, in the A2R triad, possesses a fundamental property: it is addressed. Not emitted into a void — addressed. It targets a singular recipient, whose presence is constitutive of the act. On digital platforms, the word is broadcast to an indeterminate number of recipients. And this massive broadcasting produces a phenomenological paradox: to address one's word to everyone is phenomenologically to address it to no one.

*When I post something on a platform, I do not know who will read it. I cannot know. And this ignorance is constitutive of the act — it is part of what I am doing. I am not addressing my word to someone. I am launching it into a space whose inhabitants I do not know.*

## III. The Destruction of the Response — Fragmented Reactions

Digital platforms have produced an economy of reactions — a system of fragmented, instantaneous, quasi-automatic responses that occupy the place of the Response without

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<sup>21</sup> This gap is not peculiar to Porée: continental phenomenology as a whole has not yet developed a systematic analysis of digital confession practices. The most rigorous existing work belongs more to sociology and social psychology: Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, New York, Basic Books, 2011; and *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, New York, Penguin Press, 2015.

having its structure. The like. The heart. The supportive emoji. The two-line comment. These gestures mobilise attention, emotion, time. But they do not constitute Responses in the sense of the Mahoukou Law: they contain neither existential engagement, nor singularity of recognition, nor the temporality of the authentic Response.

## IV. The Destruction of Resonance — Immediacy Against Depth

Resonance is by nature deferred — it takes time, it is inscribed in duration. The immediacy of the digital stream is the exact opposite of this temporality. Platforms produce immediate intensity. This intensity is real — the people who react are genuinely touched. But it is fugitive. It does not sediment. It leaves no transformative trace in duration.

*Intensity without depth is perhaps the most precise definition of what the digital age has done to Resonance: it has preserved the emotional appearance while destroying the temporal structure.*

## V. The New Forms of the Digital Confession

### The Call-Out — The Inverted Confession

The call-out is the practice by which someone publicly exposes the faults of another. It is an inversion of the structure of confession: instead of the one who confesses exposing his own fault, a third party exposes another person's fault. The person who is called out finds himself in the position of the one who confesses without having accomplished the act of confession — exposed, condemned, compelled to respond, without having benefited from the constitutive freedom of the risked word.

### The Viral Testimony — Massified Confession Without a Recipient

The viral testimony is sincere in its content. But the Call is launched in a space where the singular recipient does not exist. The Response is fragmented into millions of reactions. Resonance is replaced by a fugitive collective intensity. Yet it can, paradoxically, create the conditions for authentic confessions offline — by giving someone permission to speak, by naming an experience that had not yet had words.

#### ◆ *Viral Testimony as End and Viral Testimony as Catalyst*

*The most important distinction to make in analysing viral testimony is between testimony as an end and testimony as a catalyst.*

*Testimony as an end is that which seeks in the digital space itself the Resonance it will not be able to find there. The one who confesses hopes that the thousands of reactions will constitute a witness, a recognition, a transformation. This hope is phenomenologically destined to disappointment: the intensity will arrive, but the depth will not.*

*Testimony as a catalyst is different in its function: it does not seek Resonance in the digital space, but creates the conditions for a Resonance elsewhere. Someone who watches a viral testimony and recognises himself in what is said may be brought — by this recognition — to risk his own word in a space of real relationship. The digital testimony has functioned as a permission, a mirror, a first step. The Resonance sought will come — or will not — in an authentic offline relationship. This is the most precious and most fragile dimension of public testimony to identify.*

## **Performative Vulnerability — The Simulation of Confession**

Performative vulnerability designates those practices of self-exposure that use the register of vulnerability for ends other than those of authentic confession. On digital platforms, vulnerability has become a currency — it generates engagement, sympathy, sometimes money.<sup>22</sup>

Performative vulnerability is the perfect simulation of confession. It has all its codes — the exposure, the hesitation, the tear, the silence that precedes the revelation. But it is produced for an audience, calibrated for impact, optimised for engagement. It is not a risked word — it is a word calculated to give the impression of risk.

## **VI. What the Digital Confession Reveals — and What It Demands of Us**

### **The Need for Confession as an Anthropological Constant**

Millions of people expose their inner lives daily on digital platforms — in phenomenologically unfavourable conditions, in spaces not designed to receive what they deposit there. Why? Because the need to give an account of oneself is constitutive of human existence. The digital confession, in all its degraded forms, is proof that this need is indestructible.

### **What Our Epoch Has Destroyed — and Has Not Replaced**

The digital confession developed in a void: the progressive disappearance, in contemporary societies, of the traditional spaces of authentic confession. Dechristianisation has emptied confessionals. The nuclearisation of the family has reduced the proximity networks in which confessions could find recipients. The culture of performance has made vulnerability suspect in public and professional spaces. We have destroyed these spaces without building others. And it is into this void that digital platforms have installed themselves.

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<sup>22</sup> Approximate figures at the time of writing (2026): Instagram claims more than 500 million daily active story users. Reddit counts more than 100,000 active communities. r/confession had more than 4 million members in 2025. These figures evolve rapidly — what matters here is not their precision but the order of magnitude of the phenomenon.

## What We Must Invent

The training of professionals in the Debt of Resonance in a digital world. The design of new digital spaces capable of singularity of address. And cultural resistance to the confusion between intensity and depth, between reaction and Response, between digital recognition and authentic Resonance. These three directions constitute the third site of research that the prospective conclusion will articulate.

## The Risked Word — Always

This chapter closes on what began millennia ago: the human need to risk the word. The digital confession, in all its degraded forms, is proof that this need is indestructible. And this tenacity says something about us that no technology can erase: that we are beings who need to give an account of themselves. That silence carried alone ends by weighing with a burden that existence cannot indefinitely sustain.

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*This volume closes with a prospective conclusion that articulates the three sites of research opened by the five chapters — clinical, political, digital — and invites others to continue this work.*

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# Prospective Conclusion

*Three Sites of Research for Tomorrow*

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## I. What This Volume Has Accomplished

Five concepts. A system. A central question. The five concepts this volume has forged form a system whose internal coherence is as important as each of its parts. This system reveals something that Porée had approached without being able to formalise: authentic confession is the limit-case of the interpellative structure. It is its purest revelator because it brings into play, bare, without mediation, all that the A2R triad contains of demands and risks.

This is why this volume chose confession as its terrain. Not because confession is the only terrain of the Mahoukou Law — the previous volumes of this collection have shown its amplitude well beyond confession. But because confession is the terrain where the Mahoukou Law reveals itself most completely to itself.

## II. First Site of Research — A Clinical Phenomenology of Confession

The therapeutic relationship is, in its deepest structure, a relation of confession. The therapeutic goal can be understood as the restoration of the conditions of authentic confession. Someone comes to therapy because, at some moment in their history, the conditions of the risked word were destroyed. What therapy seeks to reconstruct is the possibility of the Call — the conviction that the risked word can find a space, a recipient, a Resonance.

*Successful therapy is not the one that found the right interpretations. It is the one that recreated the conditions in which the risked word can exist — and in which it can resonate.*

This site of research invites clinicians of all persuasions to take hold of the concepts forged in this volume — not as truths imposed from outside, but as tools for re-reading what they already do, and for formalising what they sense without always being able to name.

## III. Second Site of Research — A Political Phenomenology of Confession

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa constitutes without doubt the most ambitious and most documented device in the attempt to institutionalise Pardon-Resonance

at the scale of an entire society.<sup>23</sup> From the perspective of the A2R triad, this device succeeded when the three conditions were met: a sincerely addressed Call, an engaged and non-instrumentalised Response, a symbolic space sufficiently protected to allow Resonance to begin its work.

◆ ***Peace Without Resonance — Agreements That Close Without Reconciling***

*There is a particularly insidious form of failure of the political phenomenology of confession: peace agreements that legally close a conflict without the interpellative structure of reconciliation having been able to accomplish itself. These agreements are real in their institutional effects — they end hostilities, redistribute power, establish new rules. But they leave intact what the Mahoukou Law calls the unopened dialogal space: untold truths, unspoken confessions, ungranted recognitions.*

*What then occurs, over time, is predictable from the structure of the A2R triad: the absence of Resonance leaves a residue that seeks to express itself otherwise — in sporadic violence, in inter-generational resentment, in deferred revenge. Post-conflict societies that have not created space for the risked word pay this deficit for decades.*

*The political phenomenology of confession allows us to formulate a precise requirement: any durable peace process must include spaces for words — spaces in which truth can be spoken, received, and allowed to resonate. Not as an optional addition, but as a condition of the peace's durability itself.*

## **IV. Third Site of Research — A Digital Phenomenology of Confession**

The third site is the most urgent and the least explored. It requires computer scientists, designers, psychologists, educators, anthropologists, practitioners in all the world's cultural contexts. The digital phenomenology of confession is an interdisciplinary research programme that is only beginning.

Three directions: the design of new digital spaces capable of singularity of address and temporality of Response; the training of professionals in the Debt of Resonance in a digital world; and cultural resistance to the confusion between intensity and depth, between reaction and Response, between digital recognition and authentic Resonance.

## **V. An Invitation**

This volume closes. But it is not a closure — it is an opening. It invites philosophers and phenomenologists to continue the dialogue with Porée, Ricœur, Arendt, Levinas, and the non-Western traditions of thought that have thought confession under different names. It

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<sup>23</sup> Brené Brown's work on vulnerability deserves special mention here: *The Gifts of Imperfection*, Center City, Hazelden, 2010; and *Daring Greatly*, New York, Gotham Books, 2012. Brown has contributed to rehabilitating vulnerability as strength rather than weakness — an important cultural contribution. The Mahoukou Law adds a nuance: vulnerability is a strength only if it is risked in an authentic dialogal space, addressed to a singular recipient capable of an engaged Response. Vulnerability broadcast to an anonymous audience — even sincerely — cannot produce the Resonance Brown describes.

invites clinicians, jurists, educators, digital practitioners, and everyone in their ordinary lives.

For this, ultimately, is what this volume says, in all its philosophical complexity and in all its human simplicity: the risked word deserves to be received. It deserves a recipient. It deserves an engaged Response. It deserves a Resonance — even small, even imperfect, even deferred.

*It deserves that someone be there.*

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*Philosophy, when it is truly alive, does not comment on human existence. It interpellates it. It asks it to see itself with a precision it would not have had without it. And in this seeing — in this new lucidity about what we do when we speak, when we receive, when we respond — something changes.*

*This volume would like to have contributed to that change. Even a little. Even imperceptibly.*

*That would be enough.*

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www.christianmahoukou.com · 2026

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*"Philosophy, when it is truly alive, does not comment on the world. It interpellates it.  
This volume would like to be one of those."*

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