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Stephanie Johnson Date

Legacies of Loss: Traumatic Aftermaths in Twentieth-Century Literature

By

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Doctor of Philosophy

Comparative Literature

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Legacies of Loss: Traumatic Aftermaths in Twentieth Century-Literature

By

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M.A., California State University Fullerton, 2010
B.S., Ohio University, 2005

Advisor: Angelika Bammer, Ph.D.

An abstract of
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Abstract

Legacies of Loss: Traumatic Aftermaths in Twentieth Century-Literature
By Stephanie Johnson

"Legacies of Loss" investigates literary texts written in response to major violent events of the last century, including World War II, South African apartheid, and the Northern Irish Troubles. This dissertation traces conceptions of trauma, loss, and mourning from mid-century modernist texts to contemporary literature. In particular, I ask how writers intervene in political and judicial efforts to remember and redress traumatic histories, including war crimes trials and truth commissions. To address this question, I explore several texts through a comparative framework, from Elizabeth Bowen's and Rebecca West's reflections on the Second World War, to South African poets Antjie Krog's and Ingrid de Kok's writings on apartheid, and Irish novelist David Park's *The Truth Commissioner*, a fictional account of a Northern Irish truth commission based on South Africa's. This dissertation shows how these authors challenge consolatory discourses of mourning, framing the response to trauma not as the acceptance of loss but as a melancholic resistance to closure. In addition to conveying the difficult process of working through a traumatic past, these melancholic texts have political implications, refusing closure as a way of acknowledging the injustices of the past and forestalling cultural amnesia. By examining a broad topography of political conflicts, the dissertation not only asks how various cultural and political contexts inform literary responses to trauma, but also reveals linkages across literary traditions within the globalizing twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

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Introduction

Trauma, Witnessing, and "Some Stories"

"Some stories don't want to be told," Ingrid de Kok asserts in her poetry collection *Terrestrial Things*. Written in response to the victims' hearings at the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the volume specifically implies that *traumatic* stories do not want to be told, yet de Kok paradoxically proceeds to tell them as she draws from and recreates victims' testimonies in poetic form. Although traumatic events are often described as "unspeakable," de Kok's poetry foregrounds literature's enigmatic attempts to "speak" of these events despite – or perhaps because of – their inexpressible quality. How, then, do writers take up the difficult tasks of phrasing experiences that have not yet been phrased, of bearing witness to events that seem inexpressible? De Kok's reliance on victims' testimonies raises another question as well: how do writers imaginatively intervene in other modes of discourse, such as testimony, that attempt to address a traumatic past?

My dissertation takes these questions as its starting point. Specifically, I consider the ways in which literature contemplates legacies of large-scale historical traumas, including World War II and the Holocaust, South African apartheid, and the Northern Irish Troubles. I examine several works across national boundaries, from Elizabeth Bowen's World War II novel *The Heat of the Day* and Rebecca West's essays on the Nuremberg Trial, to South African poets Antjie Krog's, Ingrid de Kok's, and Sally-Ann Murray's reflections on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and Irish novelist David Park's *The Truth Commissioner*, a fictional account of a Northern Irish truth

commission based on South Africa's. In particular, I ask how these writers respond to political and judicial efforts – specifically, war crimes trials and truth commissions – that attempt to remember and redress traumatic histories. Though trials and truth commissions perform the important work of exposing and taking responsibility for past injustices, these authors frequently focus on narrative blind spots within the official records, when testimonies or legal evidence cannot describe the encounter with trauma. I am not arguing, however, that literature simply serves as a foil to institutional forms of redress: it is not a question of whether literature *or* these official public forums best acknowledge a traumatic legacy. Rather, literary texts engage with these transitional justice mechanisms to more attention more fully to a dilemma at the core of trauma itself: that traumatic experience cannot be closed or finalized, nor can it be contained by positivistic discourses of knowledge or understanding. In considering the possibilities and limitations of transitional justice mechanisms, this dissertation shows that moments of incompleteness and incomprehensibility are not obstacles that block a productive reading of trauma, but instead lead to generative possibilities, inviting rereadings – here conceived as new ways of thinking about traumatic events – and producing imaginative forms of literary response.

The literary texts in this dissertation are primarily founded in British, Irish, and South African traditions. Bearing in mind that each of these literary traditions concerns distinct and complex histories – which I do not intend to gloss over or reduce – I explore how all struggle to articulate a response to collective trauma. Within this struggle, moreover, each literary tradition engages with an overlapping range of issues: how literature depicts acts of remembering and witnessing, how this depiction complicates

historical conceptions of justice and reconciliation, and how memories of past atrocities either assimilate or clash with new narratives of national or collective unity. In putting these literary traditions into conversation with one another, my dissertation argues for a cross-cultural study of trauma. Theories of trauma and witnessing have predominately emerged from Holocaust literature and testimony, and while my dissertation engages with that scholarship to a large extent, I ask how other recent events contribute to the scholarly discourse of trauma. By selecting a diverse topography of historical traumas, this dissertation not only examines how various cultural and political contexts inform literary responses to trauma, but also reveals linkages across literary traditions within the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The field of trauma studies emerged in the early 1990s as an attempt to construct an ethical response to suffering. Deriving from the confluence of deconstructive and psychoanalytic criticism and the study of Holocaust testimony, trauma theory investigates a phenomenon that seems to resist expression. In her seminal study on trauma, Cathy Caruth asserts that "trauma stands outside representation altogether" (*UE* 17). Her theory of trauma builds on Freud's observations; in particular, she notes that Freud "wonders at the peculiar and sometimes uncanny way in which catastrophic events seem to repeat themselves for those who have passed through them" (1).[1] Trauma survivors frequently

[1] Freud's conception of trauma developed over the course of his career. In *Studies on Hysteria*, for instance, he considered the dynamics of trauma, repression, and symptom formation, contending that an overwhelming event can be forgotten and yet return in the form of somatic symptoms or compulsive repetition. Although Freud initially concludes that neurotic symptoms were more frequently the result of repressed drives and desires than of traumatic events, he returned to his theory of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principal*, which originated with his treatment of World War I soldiers. In this text, Freud remarks on the repeated nightmares and flashbacks that brought these soldiers back to their wartime experience. Then, in *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud elaborates on the concept of latency, which suggests that the memory of a traumatic event can be lost over time but then regained when triggered by a similar event. *Moses*

relive their experiences through nightmares, flashbacks, or reenactments. This repetition transpires because traumatic events are not completely assimilated as they occur; the survivor is unable to properly encode and process trauma when it initially takes place.[2] Thus, an intrinsic epistemological fissure erupts between a traumatic event and its cognitive representation. As Caruth explains, "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (*UE* 4). Though the origin of a traumatic event is often unknown and unintegrated, the trauma itself is continuously present and intrusive. Trauma comes to be identified only through repetitive flashbacks that reenact the event because the mind cannot recreate it otherwise. According to Caruth, "The historical power of trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all" (*UE* 17). Traumatic experiences are fixed and timeless, maintaining the ability to interrupt conscious thought.

The repetitive nature of trauma calls into question the way in which events are remembered and understood. If trauma, as Caruth says, "is not fully perceived as it occurs," it cannot easily be explained through direct reference (*UE* 18). Caruth proposes:

> [I]t is here, in the equally widespread and bewildering encounter with trauma—both in its occurrence and in the attempt to understand it—that

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and Monotheism outlines a theory of trauma that could apply to the historical development of whole societies, so that each collective trauma invokes memories of other traumas, causing history to become a complex entanglement of catastrophes inflicted and suffered.

[2] For more on the neurobiological effects of trauma on memory formation, see Bessel A. Van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart's essay "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma" in Caruth's edited collection *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*.

> we can begin to recognize the possibility of a history which is no longer straightforwardly referential (that is, no longer based on simple models of experience and reference). Through the notion of trauma…we can understand that a rethinking of reference is not aimed at eliminating history, but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not. (*UE* 11)

Since the event itself remains oblique, efforts to accurately represent it are problematic. Often, traumatic experiences cannot be relayed linearly, but evolve from the unexpected and haunting mental repetitions they produce. The possibility to recreate events through direct modes of reference, such as historical narratives, is inexorably reduced. Yet the inability to recall or comprehend an event in its entirety does not mean that its history is eliminated, as Caruth reminds us. Since trauma is only realized in retrospect, the traumatic event becomes history, though it transmits a different and unfamiliar history, one that challenges our conception of how events are remembered and understood. Instead of developing a notion of history based on fully understanding and reconstructing an event, Caruth addresses the difficulty of comprehending a history that evades full awareness. Histories of trauma cannot be easily articulated or defined, and their very elusiveness means that they intrusively return precisely because they cannot be known.

The discourse of trauma theory consequently emphasizes silent repression, fragmented narratives, and the temporal disorientation that survivors experience when past traumas intrude into the present. Psychiatrist Judith Herman describes survivors' initial reaction to trauma as "wordless and static" to the point where their "account of the

event may be repetitious, stereotyped, and emotionless" (175). To use the psychoanalytic terms preferred by Herman, working through trauma rather than reenacting it requires an active recontextualizing of the traumatic event; she asserts that the survivor must narratively reconstruct the traumatic event so that it can be "integrated into the survivor's life story, thereby "provid[ing] a context within which the particular meaning of the trauma can be understood" (175-6).[3] Even though reconstructing and articulating trauma may alleviate the pain and proximity of the experience, the process of integration is not so easily achieved because trauma often results in silence or unconscious performances. Herman refers to the paradoxical coexistence of the need to speak and the inability to do so as the "dialectic of trauma", noting that the symptoms of trauma "simultaneously call attention to the existence of an unspeakable secret and deflect attention from it" (1). To move beyond this impasse, psychiatrists have argued that survivors must narrate their experience in the presence of an attentive listener; as Susannah Radstone proposes, after a traumatic experience occurs, the "act of recovery takes place in relation to a *witness*" (20). Trauma is usually approached through its articulation, a process that allows the survivor to begin to work through the incident by conveying it to another.

Some traumas, however, seem profoundly inexpressible, not only in the sense that the trauma is too overpowering to articulate but also because the event itself is so destructive that no witnesses are left behind. Jean-François Lyotard addresses this problem in *Le Differend* by considering the incommensurable experiences of Holocaust victims who died in the gas chambers, whose deaths have been exploited by Holocaust

[3] Herman's psychoanalytic notion of working through stems from Freud's research; see his essay "Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through".

deniers such as Robert Faurisson and David Hoggan. These historical revisionists claim that any who survived a concentration camp could not have witnessed the interiors of the gas chambers and ovens first hand in an effort to disprove the existence of such killing mechanisms.[4] Considering these troubling assertions, Lyotard encounters a radical impasse, which he refers to as the "differend", that reflects a profound inability to phrase a conflict or wrong. Referring to an unresolved dispute, the differend arises when no rule or criterion can be agreed upon or even verbalized to decide the conflict. For Lyotard, a victim's wrong cannot be articulated, and thus a victim is not only someone who has been wronged, but also someone who has lost the power to present that wrong. In response to the dangerous formulations of Holocaust deniers, Lyotard asserts that traumatic events cannot be simply answerable to positivistic discourses that attempt to firmly establish the reality of the events in question; rather, such events lack the idioms to adequately phrase them. Lyotard therefore theorizes the inherent failure of language to engage with what is inexpressible in trauma, and he points to an ethical injunction to confront this very failure: "What is at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, perhaps in a politics, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them" (30). Language may be in fact a site of impossibility given the ineffable phenomena of trauma; nevertheless, it is precisely because of this impossibility that language is also the means through which we grasp what is *not yet*: the attempt to address trauma acknowledges the difficulty of ever fully doing so while still allowing for the creation of as yet unformulated discourses.

The attempt to phrase new idioms and expressions of trauma, however, encounters particular challenges when events such as the Holocaust preclude their own

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[4] For a fuller account of the development of Holocaust denials, see Deborah Lipstadt's *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory*.

witnessing. Since the inaccessibility and incomprehensibility of trauma prevents its articulation, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub have identified a "crisis in witnessing", raising the question of how to bear witness to an experience that cannot be owned or understood (206). In their co-written volume *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Felman and Laub consider both the imperative of trauma survivors to speak of their experiences and the accompanying impossibility of telling. Like Herman, Felman and Laub maintain that trauma's uncontextualizable excess must be passed on to a listener or respondent, although the resulting narrative, marked as it may be with silences, repetitions, and omissions, does not necessarily produce autobiographical or testimonial certainty. Drawing on his experience compiling testimonies from Holocaust survivors, Laub asserts that since the overwhelming magnitude of that event resulted in shock and silence, the listener of Holocaust testimony must be able to "*listen to and hear the silence*, speaking mutely both in silence and in speech, both from behind and within the speech" (58, italics original). Testimony comprises not only that which is said, but also that which is left *unsaid*. Moreover, what remains unsaid is not without epistemological value even if silences or omissions undermine epistemological certainty; according to Laub, listening to testimony engenders the "*discovery* of knowledge – its evolution, and its very *happening*. Knowledge in the testimony is, in other words, not simply a factual given that is reproduced and replicated by the testifier, but a genuine advent, and event in its own right" (62, italics original). To hear another's testimony is to witness the creation of knowledge, as the survivor comes to acknowledge a trauma that, up until its narration, consisted of an overwhelming and incognizant shock. Significantly, this knowledge is not empirical or historical per se, but

instead transmits another dimension of traumatic experience, one that recognizes the rupture that trauma causes in language and representation.[5] That is, testimony does not provide "a completed statement, a totalizable account" of trauma, as Felman says, but the testimony's inability to offer a full explanation gestures towards the limits of logic which traumatic events surpass (5).

Even as the struggle to fully express a traumatic event renders trauma, in Caruth's word, "unclaimable", it is this very definition of trauma that often generates criticism. Dominick LaCapra, for instance, argues that Caruth's theory of trauma "seems dangerously close to conflating absence (of absolute foundations and total meaning or knowledge) with loss and even sacralizing, or making sublime, the compulsive repetition or acting-out of a traumatic past" (*History* 121). While LaCapra takes a psychoanalytic approach to trauma that is not dissimilar to Caruth's, he does not see in her theory a suitable means of working through a traumatic past. The effort of working through, for LaCapra, does not necessarily lead to the "seamless" integration of trauma into narrative memory or the recollection of "total knowledge", yet he asserts that such an effort "enables one to recount events and perhaps to evoke experience, typically through nonlinear movements that allow trauma to register in language and its hesitations,

[5] To illustrate the type of knowledge testimony produces, Laub recounts the narrative of a Holocaust survivor who witnessed the Auschwitz uprising. The survivor remembered that four chimneys were bombed, but later her account was discredited by historians who noted that only one chimney was destroyed. The memory of the survivor was therefore seen as fallible, and her testimony could not be used as a credible source. Laub, however, argued that the survivor nonetheless testified to a particular truth; in seeing the chimneys explode, regardless of how many there were, she "testified to an event that broke the all compelling frame of Auschwitz, where Jewish armed revolts just did not happen, and had no place. She testified to the breakage of a framework" (60). Her eyewitness account attests to an essential act of resistance and the will to survive, acts that burst open of the frame of Auschwitz, which functioned as a place of annihilation.

indirections, pauses, and silences" (121-122). Caruth's emphasis on trauma's unrepresentability and its persistent and haunting return, however, causes LaCapra to caution against what he refers to as the "valorization" of traumatic symptoms in her work. Meanwhile, Ruth Leys takes issue with the way in which Caruth frames the repetitious effects of trauma, arguing against what she terms "the pathos of the literal" in Caruth's conception of trauma (295). According to Caruth, the symptoms of trauma, including dreams and flashbacks, emerge as "the literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits" (5). By contrast, Leys argues that this emphasis on literality runs the risk of erasing distinctions between different times and places, assuming symptomatic relations between events that have little to do with one another.[6]

Other scholars evince concern that rendering trauma unspeakable might prevent discussions that productively and ethically acknowledge the suffering of others. Fiona Ross criticizes Felman for mystifying the narrative aspects of testimony and "propos[ing] that some kinds of experience stand outside of language's redemptive possibilities. The disruption of language thus occasioned has been interpreted as rendering certain forms of experience unsayable" (27). Roger Luckhurst expresses a similar criticism when he wonders if viewing trauma as "unpresentable" and "unspeakable" might silence or preclude the development of art in response to trauma out of the belief that some experiences cannot be conveyed (12). Jacek Gutorow, Jerzy Jarniewicz, and David Kennedy likewise contend that framing trauma as inexpressible "is dangerously close to

[6] Leys's full critique of Caruth's theory of trauma can be found in her book *Trauma: A Genealogy*. In response, Felman offers a rebuttal to Leys's reading of Caruth in *The Juridical Unconscious*, pp. 175-182.

the policy of silence and unwillingness to address painful experiences" (4).[7] Broadly speaking, each of these scholars cautions against equating trauma with the unspeakable, arguing that a stance of silence may lead to a greater lack of awareness of traumatic experience or does not do justice to the survivor's suffering. However, I would contend that the assertion that trauma is "unclaimable", to use Caruth's word, is not necessarily incompatible with the desire to express it. Even as Caruth maintains that trauma may not be encoded and thus precludes direct access to the past, she nonetheless acknowledges that trauma "requires integration…for the sake of cure" (*EM* 153). She does not dispel the idea that the verbalization of trauma remains necessary in order to heal, but instead she nuances this idea, reflecting on the ways in which silence and the loss of understanding entails a crucial aspect of traumatic experience. For Caruth, integrating trauma "lose[s] both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall", and beyond this loss "there is another, more profound, disappearance: the loss, precisely, of the event's essential incomprehensibility, the force of its *affront to understanding* (*EM* 154, italics original). While passages such as this one have inspired scholars such as LaCapra to criticize Caruth's theory for valorizing trauma, I read her words in a different way. It is important to note that Caruth is not suggesting that traumatization always happens incessantly or unrelentingly; rather, she foregrounds the importance of recognizing a loss of understanding that is bound up with traumatic experience. In her

[7] Gutorow et al. provide the example of Polish attitudes towards the Holocaust, noting that the primary response is an aversion to any discussion of the event. They clarify, "This is not a denial of the monstrous nature of the Holocaust, but, rather, a kind of resistance to any critical debate and a frequently voiced supposition that the traumatic experience cannot be critically addressed. Both the supposition and the resistance condition each other, leaving an impression that there is much cultural work to do not so much with the postulate of aporia but with justifying the silence" (4).

approach to trauma, Caruth calls attention to what *cannot* be understood. Identifying this lack of understanding does not inevitably sacralize the effects of traumatization but looks for that loss of comprehension, explores it, and asks what it says about the way trauma is approached through language (*EM* 155).

While Caruth asserts that trauma is conveyed "through the refusal of a certain framework of understanding", she continues, "The impossibility of a comprehensible story, however, does not necessarily mean the denial of a transmissible truth" (*EM* 154). Caurth's discussion of "the affront to understanding" draws from Claude Lanzmann's account of his refusal to discuss a documentary film on Dr. Eduard Wirths, a Nazi camp doctor, at a conference of the Western New England Institute for Psychoanalysis.[8] Lanzmann specifically resists the suggestion that the Nazi doctor's life before the war could somehow explain his later involvement in the genocide; according the Lanzmann, the film in question "started with a picture of this Nazi doctor as a child, as a baby", and then proceeds to show interviews of people who knew Dr. Wirths as a child attesting that "'he was a very good man, a very nice man'" (*EM* 206). Lanzmann takes issue with the very notion that Dr. Wirth's development from a "nice" child to a Nazi doctor could in any way account for the actions he committed in the camps. This attempt at an explanation fails capture the enormity of the Holocaust, and for Lanzmann, the drive to explain the genocide in such a way only threatens to reduce or disparage the extreme traumatization and the millions of deaths that ensued. As Lanzmann argues:

[8] Lanzmann is perhaps best known for his influential documentary *Shoah* (1985), a nine-and-a-half-hour oral history of the Holocaust.

> [W]hen people want to understand – when they don't understand precisely the obscenity of the project of understanding – they start in 1933 or even earlier, talking about *volkisch* [folk] ideologies, the Jewish spirit opposed to the German one, etcetera, or the image of the father in Hitler's mind. All the fields of explanation (referring to the unemployment in Germany, and so on) are all true and all false…And it is a very flat truth, because you cannot proceed in that way – you cannot precisely engender the Holocaust. It is impossible. Because all these conditions – which were necessary conditions maybe, but they were not sufficient – between these conditions and the gassing of three thousand persons, men, women, children, in a gas chamber all together, there is an unbreachable discrepancy. It is simply not possible to engender one out of the other. There is no solution of continuity between the two; there is rather a gap, an *abyss*, and this abyss will never be bridged. (*EM* 206)

Lanzmann's critique of understanding reminds us that knowledge, as it pertains to trauma, is not positivistic. There is no way to account for or to rationally determine the chain of cause and effects that led to mass death; any attempt to do so runs the risk of diminishing the trauma itself by removing the very incomprehensibility that marks it as traumatic. The effort to access trauma through a logical process of understanding reduces the moment of epistemological impasse, forcing an impression of coherence that repudiates the incommensurability of traumatic experience. The type of understanding Lanzmann condemns, moreover, can be distinguished from the kind of knowledge Laub finds in testimony. Here, Lanzmann warns against a totalizing effort to make sense of trauma, whereas Laub describes the emergence of a form of knowledge that does not

presume to rationally or factually consider trauma but instead gestures toward what it does not know through its very incompleteness.

My discussion of Lanzmann is not meant to devalue the historical evidence that a violent traumatic event leaves behind, which often plays an important and crucial role in recognizing past crimes and injustices. The desire to access traumatic experience through by compiling knowledge of the past is, in many ways, understandable. Following collective trauma, an impulse to formulate some sort of understanding of the event seems to emerge as a way for societies to confront what human rights scholar Louis Bickford has called "the demons of the past" (1097). One indication of this impulse may be found in the children of Holocaust survivors, known as the second generation, who face the difficult challenge of wanting to understand their parents' experiences, even though such knowledge remains impossible. As Eva Hoffman says of growing up as a member of the second generation, the Holocaust "demands something from us, an understanding that is larger than just ourselves, that moves beyond the private vicissitudes of the inner life" (103). Hoffman approaches this task through an effort to understand the perpetrators, asking "Who, or what, constituted the enemy?" Significantly, her study of the perpetrator mindset does not attempt the rational reconstruction of the Holocaust that Lanzmann warns against, though her questioning does productively inform her sense of ethics regarding collective shame and culpability. She comes to realize, for instance, that she is not capable of holding second generation Germans "responsible for the sins of their fathers and mothers any more than I want to be held hostage to ancestral beliefs, or even to the Holocaust inheritance, forever" (110-11). While Hoffman seeks knowledge of the perpetrator, her considerations also point to some of the profound problems that societies

face in the aftermath of large violence, including the degree of responsibility its members have in addressing and acknowledging trauma.

One of the primary aims of this dissertation, then, is to trace the fault line that runs between the desire for knowledge and the incomprehensibility or non-knowledge that trauma produces. Since I consider literary texts written in response to transitional justice mechanisms, including trials and truth commissions, the status of knowledge and evidence is constantly in question throughout my analysis. Official evidence is often a necessary component of trials and truth commissions and serves to reveal longstanding structures of violence and oppression. For example, to reference another event covered in this dissertation, the South African TRC publicly exposed overwhelming evidence of police brutality, indicating the extent to which forms of institutionalized racism pervade the country's justice system. I do not claim, therefore, that the epistemological impulses which arise in response to trauma are always unbeneficial or unproductive. At the same time, I recognize Lanzmann's concern that the knowledge produced by official or historical accounts of trauma can be used to rationalize or explain the event in ways that harmfully reduce its impact. While the evidence presented before the South African TRC offers some truths about the apartheid system, these truths in no way engender apartheid any more than, as Lanzmann says, pre-war German mindsets engendered the Holocaust. At the root of these traumas lies the impossibility of understanding, but rather than viewing this loss of understanding as a nonstarter, as an obstacle that blocks a productive approach to trauma, this dissertation asks how the inability to comprehend leads to generative discussions of trauma. I read the refusal of understanding that informs discourses of trauma – including those by Caruth and Lanzmann – as an effort to

acknowledge that which cannot be understood. In other words, when the impulse to empirically or rationally understand a traumatic event is thwarted by the effects of trauma itself, this failed impulse becomes one of the crucial ways in which we are able to feel loss.

The difficult process of conveying such a profound sense of loss or non-knowledge is often foregrounded by trials and truth commissions – that is, by the very public efforts intended to redress a traumatic history. In *The Juridical Unconscious*, Felman argues that trials dramatically enact the relation of trauma and the law, thus "turn[ing] into veritable theaters of justice" (4). What characterizes these "theaters of justice", Felman contends, is the way in which they stage a crisis in the law. For instance, in the trial of Nazi war criminal Adolph Eichmann, Holocaust survivor K-Zetnick abruptly faints on the stand when he attempts to testify to the terrifying moment of selection at Auschwitz. Felman reads his collapse as the impossibility of putting the experience of the concentration camps into the language demanded by law, and in the very effort to do so, he is re-traumatized by the legal proceeding itself. To Felman, the shock of the encounter with trauma within the law transforms the court into a stage, allowing for the expression of what has hitherto been historically expressionless, so that "[i]n the courtroom …the *expressionless* turns into *storytelling* (14, italics original). This transformation exposes an "abyss" of traumatic experience, of what cannot be articulated and narrated in the language of the courtroom, as K-Zetnik's collapse embodies (95). Although the law attempts to close this abyss through legal means – e.g., by providing an evidentiary account of what happened or by meting out punishment –Felman claims that the discourse surrounding the law, and particularly that of testimony, cannot be totalized,

recuperated, or remedied. The shattering of the law, then, emerges as a claim to justice, and more specifically, to what Felman calls a "literary justice" that can begin to bear witness to the abyss (95). As Felman says, the literary "casts open the abyss so as to let us look, once more, into its depth and see its bottomlessness" (95). In the chapters to come, this dissertation will examine the ways in which traumatic experience both emerges through and disrupts the trial and the truth commission as public process of redress, pointing to both the impossibility of fully mastering trauma and the lacuna this impossibility exposes in the very depths of these legal proceedings.

If trauma opens up a void at the core of the law itself, it also invites a distinctly literary response to trauma. As Felman's emphasis on storytelling and literature suggests, the scholarship surrounding trauma often positions literature as an incisive site for approaching, if not directly understanding, traumatic experience. Caruth notes that recent developments in trauma theory have generated cross-disciplinary discussions: "if psychoanalysis, psychiatry, sociology, and even literature are beginning to hear each other anew in the study of trauma, it is because they are listening through the radical disruption and gaps of traumatic experience" (*EM* 4). "Even literature", Caruth says, as though literature does not fit neatly alongside the fields of psychoanalysis, psychiatry, sociology, or history for that matter. Perhaps literature appears surprising in this context because of its lack of reliance on empirical definitions and classifications; the American Psychiatric Association, for instance, recognizes categories of trauma with a clinical discourse that is rarely found in literary texts. And yet, literature provides one way of productively engaging with the "refusal of understanding" that accompanies trauma. Noting Freud's preoccupation with Torquato Tasso's epic poem *Gerusalemme Liberata*,

Caruth declares: "If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet" (*UE* 3).[9] Literature, then, offers a mode of response that does not seek to fully verbalize traumatic experience or impose upon it a comprehensive framework of understanding, exploring instead the boundaries of what can and cannot be known.

As theories of trauma have emerged, so have literary forms of witnessing in response to traumatic events. Jacques Derrida indicates that the acts of witnessing and testifying have always been bound up with the literary. He evokes the connection between testimony and literature by describing testimony as haunted by its fictional as well as its traumatic aspects; in *Demeure*, he asserts that not only does testimony contain a temporal gap between the moment of seeing and the moment of testifying, but testimony also cannot claim for itself objective truth since "there is no testimony that does not at least structurally imply in itself the possibility of fiction, simulacra, dissimulation, lie, and perjury – that is to say, the possibilities of literature" (29). For Derrida, as for Felman and Laub, epistemological certainty is not the aim of testimony, which establishes its connection with the literary. Felman and Laub, moreover, maintain that one of the central concerns of literary witnessing is the dilemma of adequately

[9] Although LaCapra's theory of trauma diverges from Caruth's, he nonetheless makes a similar observation regarding literature as an ethical field of response to traumatic experience, noting that "many commentators would agree with Caruth in thinking that the literary (or even art in general) is a prime, if not the privileged, place for giving voice to trauma as well as symbolically exploring the role of excess" (*Writing History* 190).

representing historical traumas, which lead to an "unresolved *crisis of history*, a crisis which in turn is translated into a *crisis of literature* insofar as literature becomes a witness, and perhaps the only witness, to the crisis within history which precisely cannot be articulated, witnessed in the given categories of history itself" (xviii, italics original). With events for which history no longer seems to provide an account, literature may stand in as witness to this seemingly impossible task of representation.

Moreover, the distinction between historical writing and literary writing has been under scrutiny for some decades now.[10] Paul Riceour argues that history is necessarily connected to the literary, noting how "history imitates in its own writing the types of emplotment handed down by our narrative tradition" (185). In addition to the assemblage of historical events into narrative, Ricoeur locates within historical narrative "the representative function of the historical imagination. We learn to see a given series of events *as* tragic, *as* comic, and so on". In this sense, history becomes fictionalized, so that "a history book can be read as a novel" (186). Ricoeur identifies another way in which history is ficiontalized as well: when history recounts what Ricoeur calls "epoch-making" events, or events which come to define a community. Though Ricoeur suggests that it is the duty of history to transmit the horror of epoch-making events, horror is a category of literature rather than of history. As Ricoeur says, "fiction gives eyes to the horrified narrator" and calls attention to the ethical significance of narrating tragic events: "There are perhaps crimes that must not be forgotten, victims whose suffering cries less for vengeance than for narration" (188). The very act of narrating suffering conveys horror in

[10] Since the 1970s, historiographers such as Hayden White have considered historical narratives as "verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences" (*Tropics* 82).

a way that enmeshes the historical with the literary, and by "giv[ing] eyes" to the narrator, literature bears witness to collective tragedy.

Within the field of literary studies, the literature of trauma and witnessing has generally been characterized by its ability to mirror traumatic symptoms through narrative. In *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, Laurie Vickroy considers the prevalence of "trauma fiction", arguing, "Trauma narratives go beyond presenting trauma as subject matter or character study. They internalize the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of traumatic experience within their underlying sensibilities and structures. They reveal many obstacles to communicating such experience: silence, simultaneous knowledge and denial, dissociation, resistance, and repression, among others" (3). As Vickory indicates, trauma literature often performs the disorienting effects of being traumatized, evoking this experience through nonlinear narratives that register trauma's misdirections, omissions, and repetitions. Kali Tal likewise identifies a "literature of trauma" comprised of survivors' narratives and poetry in *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*, in which Kal argues that these literary works "endeavor to expand their audiences' awareness of trauma by engaging them with personalized, experientially oriented means of narration that highlight the painful ambivalence that characterizes traumatic memory and warn us that trauma reproduces itself if left unattended" (3). By attempting to convey what remains lost, silenced or not understood, literary texts gesture toward the enigmatic quality of traumatic experience. Literature, in other words, engages with the possibility of expressing trauma traumatically.

While literature is capable of structurally enacting trauma to convey its shattering effects, the texts in this dissertation are concerned with what happens afterwards, with the

attempts to mourn, redress, and reconcile from historical or political traumas. Since trauma produces a break in experience, I am not suggesting that there is always a clear separation between a traumatic event and what follows. Like trauma writing, the literary texts which explore its aftermath encounter the difficulty of narrating an experience that is not fully known; trauma's incomprehensibility tends to seep into efforts to later address it. For some critics, including LaCapra, the retrospective writing of trauma offers a potential mode for healing and recovery; as LaCapra maintains, writing trauma "involves processes of acting out, working over, and to some extent working through in analyzing and 'giving voice' to the past – processes of coming to terms with traumatic 'experiences,' limit events, and their symptomatic effects that achieve articulation in different combinations and hybridized forms" (*WH* 186). The texts I consider, however, do not always strive to work through the trauma of the past – and indeed, at times these texts indicate that they could not, at any rate, accomplish such a task. Instead, the literary works in this dissertation show how public attempts to redress trauma, such as the trial and the truth commission, open a contentious dialogue with the past that sometimes results in retraumatization and renewed impressions of loss.

Chapter 1 discusses the writings of Irish novelist Elizabeth Bowen and English author Rebecca West, who both travelled through Europe following World War II to report on political and judicial efforts of reconstruction. By positioning Bowen's novel *The Heat of the Day* (1949) alongside West's essays on the Nuremberg Trial, I consider these authors' skeptical perspectives on attempts to understand or come to terms with the traumas of the Second World War. Bowen engages with the difficulties of aestheticizing the experience of trauma, presenting it as an event that cannot be read or ever fully

elucidated in *The Heat of the Day*. Instead of working through trauma, *The Heat of the Day* embodies what Bowen defines as "poetic truth": "The essence of a poetic truth is that no statement of it can be final" (*Mulberry* 36). *The Heat of the Day* accordingly allows poetic truth to emerge precisely because of its refusal to seek closure. Like Bowen, West struggles with the challenge of addressing the trauma of the past. Through her articles on the Nuremberg Trial, first published in *The New Yorker* and later gathered into her collection *A Train of Powder*, West highlights how the trial as a judicial event, with all its attendant ambiguities, is adapted as a paradigm for journalistic narratives – though for West, such narratives are unable to overcome a perceived lack in the judicial proceedings themselves. The Nuremberg trial, writes West, "was one of the events which do not become an experience" (246). West's writing on the trial describes a fundamental gap at the very center of what was intended to be the most emphatic dramatization of postwar justice. Rather than attempting to fill in this gap through the discourse of journalism, however, West calls attention to inability of any discourse, journalistic, legal, or otherwise, to redress and makes sense of the incomprehensibility of the Holocaust.

Since the Nuremberg Trial, many countries have elected to forgo conventional juridical trials in favor of community-building forums such as truth commissions. As Lyndsey Stonebridge says, "Today most agree that it is through hearing the testimony of victims that the need for justice is felt most keenly. The truth commission, pioneered in South Africa, in which both victim and perpetrator testimony is central, has replaced the war crime trial for countries making the transition into peace" (25).[11] Chapter 2 therefore

[11] Some scholars contend that truth commissions are more effective than trials in encouraging societies to leave behind periods of violence or mass atrocity. Katherine Mack lists several reasons for this: "Trials can retraumatize victims who must share their experiences in an adversarial context. They tend not to promote truth telling on the part of perpetrators who, out of

turns to Antjie Krog's memoir *Country of my Skull* (1998), as Krog explores the difficult process of testifying to a traumatic past during the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Part memoir and part reportage, *Country of my Skull* developed from Krog's work as a journalist covering the TRC for the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). The text chronicles Krog's uncomfortable reckoning with her Afrikaner heritage as well as her response to the victims' testimonies, which initiate a process of retraumatization as Krog witnesses their suffering. This chapter shows how the medium of poetry provides Krog with a forum through which she may approach the trauma of the past. As Krog wrestles with the question of how to convey trauma, she laments, "No poetry should come forth from this. May my hand fall off if I write this… If I write this, I exploit and betray. If I don't, I die" (66). Krog echoes Adorno's famous maxim, "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric", yet like Adorno, Krog does not forsake poetry altogether. Since part of Krog's unsettled position stems from her role as a reporter, where she must render testimonies into 40 second, easily digestible sound bites for SABC radio, her question is not whether or not poetry should be written but how it may be written without exploiting the suffering of others and reinforcing the very culture that caused that suffering in the first place.

Chapter 3 offers a reading of David Park's *The Truth Commissioner* (2008) to examine the Northern Irish Troubles, a thirty-year period of sectarian violence between loyalist and republican communities. This chapter explores the ways in which *The Truth*

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self-protection, seek to obscure the details of their past. Finally, given their aim of attaining an individual verdict of guilt or innocence, trials do not typically produce a compelling picture of the myriad individuals, practices, and ideologies that created the enabling conditions for and context of abuse" (3). In light of these critiques, Teresa Godwin Phelps asserts that the distinctive setting provided by a truth commission can "allow for fuller transformative and constitutive storytelling beyond the scope of any trial" (67).

Commissioner imaginatively addresses the challenges of memory recuperation and collective healing in Northern Ireland by presenting a fictional truth commission based on South Africa's. In particular, the novel depicts the fictional Truth Commission as scripted and cynical, designed to follow and maintain dominant discourses of reconciliation and healing, though Park suggests these discourses do not comfortably translate into a Northern Irish context. Moreover, the novel contains multiple metaphors of disease and contagion, which not only disassemble the rhetoric of healing but also present the traumatic past itself as infectious, continually threatening to contaminate the present. The novel's numerous references to disease further imply that the Commission itself is poisoned from within, disrupted by an autoimmune logic in which it is undone by the very legal structures that aimed to advance the process of reconciliation. *The Truth Commissioner* thus reveals how legal forums of redress are sometimes unable to contain the violence of the past, which can incessantly and dangerously return at the most unexpected moments.

To conclude the dissertation, Chapter 4 analyzes the elegy as a form of literary witnessing that attests to the difficulty of overcoming trauma. Traditionally, the elegy has been theorized as a mode that enacts the morning process, allowing the bereaved to productively express – and hence recover from – feelings of grief and loss. This chapter, however, considers the ways in which twentieth century elegies forgo the "successful" process of morning, retaining instead a melancholic attachment to the past. Specifically, I examine the elegies of South African poets Ingrid de Kok and Sally-Ann Murray, who both ask how the post-apartheid country may address the violence of the past even after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has ended. I show how de Kok and Murray

depathologize the elegy; their poetry denies a sense of closure not to perpetuate a continual and hopeless depressive state but to reveal the systemic injustices that trouble South Africa both during and after the apartheid era. Rather than producing narratives of catharsis, the "elegiac imperative", as de Kok calls it, is to bear witness to histories of struggle (61). Furthermore, this chapter shows how de Kok and Murray consider their country's history by looking beyond its borders, creating transnational connections across the elegiac tradition. De Kok finds inspiration from Thomas Hardy's poem "The Darkling Thrush" to contemplate her country's uncertain future in her volume *Terrestrial Things* (2002), and both she and Murray evoke W.B. Yeats's "Easter 1916" in order to explore notions of political sacrifice and memorialization. While de Kok and Murray engage with other literary traditions to explore open-ended expressions of grief, their poetry still preserves the specificities of the trauma of apartheid.

By examining texts that respond to the World War II and the Nuremberg Trial, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the Northern Irish Troubles, this dissertation seeks to denationalize responses to collective trauma. The theoretical framework developed by trauma theory is capable of expanding our approach to literary expressions of trauma in a variety of contexts. Since its instantiation, trauma theory has been concerned with the notion of attending to the suffering of the other; Caruth has said that "trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures" and has argued that "history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (*EM* 11, *UE* 24). At present, however, a cross-cultural dialogue is only beginning to take shape within the discourses of trauma and witnessing. Jill Bennett and Roseanne Kennedy, for instance, call for a

transformation of trauma studies from a Eurocentric discipline to one capable of addressing "the multicultural and diasporic nature of contemporary culture" (5). Stef Craps, meanwhile, has argued for the decolonization of trauma studies, claiming that prevailing discourses of trauma "tend to take for granted the universal validity of definitions of trauma and recovery that have developed out of the history of Western modernity" and "generally disregard the connections between metropolitan and non-Western or minority traumas" (2). The development of a transnational theory of trauma could therefore benefit from a discussion of the ways in which non-Western cultures conceive of and respond to historical traumas.

Michael Rothberg offers a compelling conceptual model for this kind of cross-cultural analysis. In an essay called "From Gaza to Warsaw", he asks, "What happens when different histories of extreme violence confront each other in the public sphere?" (523). Although every historical trauma is distinct, Rothberg calls for a form of comparative thinking that traverses borders, arguing, "Collective memories of seemingly distinct histories – such as those of slavery, the Holocaust, and colonialism – are not so easily separable" (524). In *Multidirectional Memory*, Rothberg develops the notion of a form of traumatic remembrance that thoughtfully considers and works through overlaps between different events, arguing "that we consider memory as multidirectional: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not private" (3). Remembering "multidirectionally", as Rotherberg says, reveals a method for analyzing the transnational and intercultural relation between traumatic histories.

This dissertation, then, seeks to conceive of different sites of trauma together without reducing them to either the same type of suffering or to utterly separate events.

The literary texts I consider converge at times and diverge at others, reflecting the specific complexities of their cultural and historical circumstances. For instance, each text responds to a moment of political transition, which Paul Gready describes as "a change in political regime and culture towards greater democratization, post-repression, post-colonialism, post-war" (2). While each of the political transitions this dissertation considers, from post-World War II Europe to post-apartheid South African and post-Agreement Northern Ireland, represent distinct challenges, the literary texts I examine reveal how the past continues to inform the present during the complex process of transition. Despite the designation of "post" that is used to indicate cultural and political shifts, transnational eras do not inevitably generate any historic break with the past but oscillate uneasily between continuity and rupture. Transition, according to Gready, is "a contested and intrinsically incomplete process, shot through with considerations of politics and power, mobilised as a demand and a promise, and characterized by continuity as well as multi-faceted and uneven change. Patterns from the past are often reconfigured rather than radically altered in the present". The process of transition requires a reckoning with the past, though this reckoning is not achieved through a simple act of looking into the past and deriving specified lessons or meanings. As Gready says, "The politics of memory is interwoven with the repetition and recasting of past divisions and conflicts, as the past continues to influence, sometimes literally exploding into, ongoing societal disputation" (4). Gready's formulation indicates that the past contains a dangerous, "explosive" force capable of reigniting disputes through unlooked-for repetitions of past conflict.

Throughout the dissertation, I show how the explosion of the past into the present plays out in literary representations of trauma, as the texts I discuss present forms of retraumatization and an inability to fully contain the violence of the past. In addition to responding to the precarious and complex process of political transition, the literary texts covered in this dissertation all evince a lack of closure and a refusal to fit trauma within positivistic frameworks of understanding. That said, each of the literary texts I consider navigates political transition and the refusal of understanding in recognizably distinguishable ways. To give a few brief examples that the following chapters will make clearer: although Rebecca West and Antjie Krog are both journalists who struggle to make sense of legal mechanisms for redressing the past, Krog's role as a reporter at the South African TRC causes her to actively and uncomfortably confront her privilege in a way West does not. Although West is not uncritical of the Western Allied Forces, Krog's reckoning with the violence of apartheid includes a much more personal, self-reflective critique of her Afrikaner heritage. Additionally, in his novel *The Truth Commissioner*, David Park cautions against borrowing too heavily from South Africa's specific approach to reconciliation to address the particular cultural and political divides of Northern Ireland. Ingrid de Kok and Sally-Ann Murray, meanwhile, frame the trauma of South Africa's longstanding racial oppression in ways that sometimes question dominant theoretical paradigms, suggesting that literary texts cannot act out and work through this trauma in the manner that critics such as LaCapra have suggested.[12]

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[12] As Stef Craps points out, "Unlike structural trauma, racism is historically specific; yet, unlike historical trauma, it is not related to a particular event, with a before and after. Understanding racism as a historical trauma, which can be worked through, would be to obscure the fact that it continues to cause damage in the present" (32). Although I question the "before and after" structure of the traumatic event that Craps presents – trauma is not so clearly delineated – and while I also question whether some historical traumas, such as the Holocaust, can ever be fully

The collective traumas this dissertation considers are all well-documented historical events; public transcripts of the Nuremberg Trial, the South African TRC, and peace process in Northern Ireland are all readily available. Each of these processes has captured the attention of writers, from Bowen and West, to Krog, Park, de Kok, and Murray, raising the question of how literature intervenes in the official histories. Often, these authors accentuate what remains unknown and unresolved, suggesting that the legacy of trauma is a legacy of ambiguity. Their texts expose the silence and incomprehensibility of trauma and position traumatic experience as one that cannot be fully voiced. Instead of trying to make sense of the past, these writers peer through the numerous records and official narratives, locating within the event the stories that refuse to express trauma in any concrete or definable way – the stories, in other words, that refuse to be told.

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worked through, I am in agreement with his assertion that too quickly applying prevalent discourses of trauma to systemic racism would run the risk of glossing over its continued prevalence in the present day.

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The "Impossible" Acts of Reading and Writing: Trauma and Experience and Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* and Rebecca West's Nuremberg Essays

I

Late in the summer of 1946, two writers traveled to Europe to report on postwar efforts to reestablish peace, justice, and the rule of law. Anglo-Irish writer Elizabeth Bowen journeyed from her native Ireland to the Paris Peace Conference for the *Cork Examiner*, which published her impressions of the conference in three installments. At almost the same time as Bowen attended the Paris Peace Conference, Rebecca West traveled from London to Germany to report on the more widely publicized Nuremberg trial for the *New Yorker*. In the wake of the Second World War, demands for justice were levied everywhere around them – in the call for reparations issued by the Paris Peace Conference, for instance, and in the verdict of capital punishment Nuremberg declared for the Nazi war criminals – and yet Bowen and West each express doubt regarding whether or not such processes could restore order and mend the trauma of the war. These doubts filter through their postwar writings, and like the events on which they reported, Bowen and West struggle to come to terms with a traumatic past that is not easily understood or explained. Bowen's novel *The Heat of the Day*, which she began during World War II and published two years after she attended the conference, reflects a concern that the trauma of war will not be repaired or reconciled. While Bowen creates a

fictional setting to convey trauma, West revised her *New Yorker* essays for her collection *A Train of Powder*, expanding on her reflections of the Nuremberg trial. Although she was there as a journalist, she questions the efficacy of efforts to write the trial, which she rather enigmatically terms "one of the events which did not become an experience" (*TP* 246).

I focus on Bowen and West in this chapter not merely because they held similar roles in the years after the war, as reporters of Europe's reconstruction, but primarily because their writings raise compelling questions regarding the ability to address a traumatic past. Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* deals explicitly with the traumatic occurrence of war, while West, as I will later show, does not recount her time at Nuremberg as traumatic as such, but nonetheless describes the trial in a manner that structurally resonates with theories of trauma. In both authors' texts, I locate the dilemma of expressing events that seem inexpressible. Instead of resolving this tension, these texts reinforce the problem of communicating the events they depict. Bowen's fictitious account and West's reports of Nuremberg resist closure, and it is through their open-endedness that these texts articulate a response to events that appear to defy reason. Their writings point to a crisis of meaning that arises from a profound inability to understand the trauma of the past.

This crisis – the problem of creating a coherent and meaningful narrative of experience – is closely related to the occurrence of trauma. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma poses a challenge to our philosophical and cognitive understandings of the world and shakes the very foundations of those understandings. Caruth describes trauma as "the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within

the schemes of prior knowledge" (*Trauma* 153). The anxiety that trauma produces because it resists integration into existing structures of meaning and representation is crucial to the very definition of trauma. As Caruth explains, "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (*UE* 4). Since the origin of a traumatic event may remain unexperienced and unintegrated, it is often said to lie outside the bounds of representation. Caruth, however, points out that the force of the traumatic event remains continuously present and intrusive, as it surfaces through repetitive traces such as flashbacks or reenactments. A traumatic event is thus characterized by the belatedness of its experience. Caruth continues, "The historical power of trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all" (*UE* 17). Because of its inassimilable quality, a traumatic event interrupts the formation and perception of experience and is often irreconcilable with straightforward or explanatory frameworks.

The space of literature may provide a narrative means for exploring the effects of trauma on memory, representation, and experience. Critics have referred to both Bowen and West as writers of trauma who specifically foreground the dilemma of how to articulate a traumatic event. Jessica Gildersleeve has described Bowen's oeuvre as conditioned by the "hauntedness of the traumatic experience, an event not understood in its own time" (5). Elaine Showalter, meanwhile, has called West's novel on the First World War, *The Return of the Soldier*, the "first English novel about shell shock" (190). Reading Bowen or West as writers of trauma places them within a wider cultural

discussion of trauma that has been linked to the literary movements to which they have contributed; modernist writing, for instance, has been said to emphasize a disorienting psychological fragmentation that resonates with the haunting effects of trauma. Dominick LaCapra views modernism as an appropriate literary medium for exploring "post-traumatic effects" precisely because it embodies an experimental form that disrupts the linearity and reality of experience (180). He says of Virginia Woof, for example, that "[w]hat she writes is in no sense a conventional narrative but one that both traces the effects of trauma and somehow, at least linguistically, tries to come to terms with those effects, so that they will be inscribed and recalled but perhaps reconfigured in ways that make them not entirely disabling" (180). Less conventional narrative forms, such as those that embrace fragmentation and resist closure, are accordingly well suited for attempting to portray the dislocating and silencing force of trauma.

As LaCapra indicates, critics have asserted that literary narratives engage with trauma in a potentially productive manner. Suzette A. Henke claims that, following trauma, writers "were able to assert heroic agency through artistic projects that enabled them to master life-shattering events and marshal their creative resources in the interests of bold, experimental, often healing works of fiction" (169-170). This line of thinking maintains that narratives provide a cathartic mode for recasting traumatic events, usurping the haunting possession caused by trauma in favor of a reassuring sense of control over the event. The ability to narrate trauma, even unconventionally, might therefore palliate its damaging effects.

While this dissertation will provide support for the claim that works of literature are especially capable of conveying the unspeakable nature of trauma, one of my aims in

this chapter is to put pressure on the notion that a primary benefit of literary responses to trauma reinforces the purpose of healing. Assuming the restorative power of narrative presupposes a process that is structurally teleological, one that moves from the event of trauma, to the residual incomprehension of this event, to finally working through and healing from it. This is not to say that literature does not contribute to or enable the process of coming to terms with a traumatic event, but that there are other productive ways of formulating literature's engagement with trauma. Narrative may not always return agency to those who have been traumatized, but may sometimes call attention to a wound that does not fully heal. When literature refuses to assimilate the traumatic event, it speaks to the difficulty and sometimes the impossibility of closure – and indeed asks if seeking closure is always the best way to do justice to trauma. I see in Bowen and West two examples of a literary model that lets trauma stand, a model that asks us to reflect on trauma's unassimilated quality rather than make sense of it. The texts I will discuss refuse to present the assimilation of experience as meaning, and it is in their lack of comprehensible meaning that they begin to approach a literary response to trauma. In other words, they construct a form of writing in which the remnants of trauma perpetually linger.

One of the central problems I will trace throughout this chapter is that of trying to "read" and interpret trauma. This question arises from the ways in which Bowen and West present trauma as an event that calls to be read even as it defies any efforts to interpret it. If trauma is not fully assimilated as it occurs, as Caruth maintains, then it cannot be understood through a straightforward framework of reference and representation. What is being referenced as trauma cannot be experienced precisely

because of its traumatic nature and thereby confounds our understanding of it. How, then, do we attempt to write, to read, and to interpret the event of trauma?

To address this question, I will argue that trauma is in a sense unreadable because it cannot be known except through its inherent lack of experience. Jacques Derrida's discussion of the unreadable proves instructive in this regard. Derrida's notion of the unreadable is not directly opposed to what is readable, but instead, makes the very conditions for reading possible in the first place. As he says, "Unreadability does not arrest reading, does not leave it paralyzed in the face of an opaque surface: rather, it starts reading and writing and translation moving again. The unreadable is not the opposite of the readable but rather the ridge (*arête*) that also gives it momentum, movement, sets it in motion" (*LO* 116). For Derrida, reading is not simply a forthright and unambiguous process of understanding. If the meaning of a text is transparent –if indeed, such a transparent text even fully exists – then its meaning would not be read so much as simply assimilated. That is to say, if the meaning of a text is straightforwardly evident, there is no reason to make an effort to interpret it. Instead, reading, as an interpretive act, is generated by the very undecidability that surrounds a text's meaning. Rather than preventing the text from being read, its undecidable quality serves as a condition of possibility for reading.

In this formulation, reading is not anchored to a totalizing process that seeks only to discover and affirm meaning, but is set in motion in other ways precisely because of its undecidability. As Derrida says:

> This indecision seems to interrupt or suspend the decipherment of reading, though in truth it ensures its future. Indecision keeps attention forever in suspense,

> breathless, that is to say, keeps it alive, alert, vigilant…Interruption is indecisive, it undecides. It gives its breath to a question that, far from paralyzing, sets in motion. Interruption even releases an infinite movement. ("Rams" 146)[13]

Any process of reading is haunted by the experience of the unreadable; the text always carries within it the potential to defy meaning and interpretation. Derrida later refers to this "infinite movement" as the "infinite process of reading", a generative process that is made possible through the many hypotheses and undecidable moments in the text itself ("Rams" 157). The questions and confusions a text raises ask readers to return to it, to keep reading it in search of meaning that may or may not be disclosed. It is not necessarily that an unreadable text cannot ever be read, but that it has not yet been read or that it may continue to be read in a variety of ways.

I now turn to Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* and West's essays on the Nuremberg trial, where I will further address the notion of the unreadable and align it with theories of trauma. Bowen and West both proffer writings that are in some sense unreadable. Their texts do not offer a cogent understanding or interpretation of the events they describe. Instead, the writings of Bowen and West resist closure and challenge the idea that meaning may be revealed. And yet I contend that it is in their very ambiguity and uncertainty that these texts begin to convey the opacity of a traumatic event that will never be fully known.

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[13] Just as the unreadable does not prevent reading, stressing the undecidable does not suggest that making decisions is impossible. Rather, any process of decision-making is haunted by the experience of the undecidable, the effects of which are not immediately known. See Derrida's "Force de loi: Le 'fondement mystique de l'autorité", *Cardozo Law Review (*1990) 11: 919-1045.

II

In July of 1946, Elizabeth Bowen travelled from Ireland to France to report on the Paris Peace Conference for the *Cork Examiner*. The conference took place at the Luxembourg Palace between 29 July and 15 October 1946, redefining national borders that had been dismantled during the war and determining war reparations for ravaged countries.[14] The conference was intended to restore lawfulness to postwar Europe, but as Lyndsey Stonebridge notes, it "was a tense, weary event. Any sense that the world's diplomats were coming together to script the final chapter of an atrocious history was quickly tempered by the realization that they were, in fact, in an early episode in the Cold War" (118). Rather than merely signaling the end of the calamities produced by the Second World War, the conference partly exposed the instability Europe continued to face.

Bowen was known for having an interest in questions of justice and reparations; in addition to reporting on the conference, she served as a member of the Royal Commission on Capital Punishment from 1949 to 1953 and specifically considered whether the death penalty should be applied to convicted murderers in Britain (Hepburn "Trials and Errors" 131). Her interest in these issues often seeps into her fiction, moving from the sphere of large-scale politics to the more local settings of her characters. Some of the concerns she expresses regarding the Paris Peace Conference, for example, will later resonate with *The Heat of the Day*. Bowen's writings on the conference provide less of a commentary on its political maneuverings than they do of the impressions she makes

[14] Specifically, the borders of Italy, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Romania, the Soviet Union, Bulgaria and France were redrawn, while Italy, Romania, Bulgaria and Finland resumed sovereign state status (Stonebridge 118).

of it – and at its outset, she specifically wonders if the conference will yield much of an impression at all. She writes of its opening:

> People pressed up to the barriers as the cars streamed under the beflagged archway. Followed, inevitably, an anticlimax: lessening interest outside, threatening boredom within – for, indeed, the initial Plenary Sessions, inescapable, time-losing tribute to formality and to the *amour propre* of the Delegations, not only did not cut very much ice but made one doubt whether ice ever could *be* cut. (*People, Places, Things* 67, italics original)

Bowen recognizes a prevailing mood that the conference fails to meet its expectations of reestablishing order in Europe. In the light of the Conference's taxing and challenging tasks, it is perhaps not surprising that Bowen acknowledges a sense of anticlimax. The nature of the Conference's beginning – and the sense that it will never really begin at all – is one that Bowen continues to trace in her report: "Nothing, one learned, would begin; nothing that was anything could be expected to begin, till the Plenary Sessions had run their course" (67). Bowen's concern regarding the slow start of the Conference raises questions of how we begin to redress the lawlessness and trauma of war. Her anxious and skeptical attitude towards the question of how to begin the long process of resolution will resurface in *The Heat of the Day* through a slightly different register, in which she will disrupt narrative form by withholding the beginning to her protagonist's complicated and traumatic past. As I will shortly discuss, the novel obscures the origin of the traumatic event so that it remains irrevocably lost.

Bowen released *The Heat of the Day* in 1948, two years after the Paris Peace Conference. Although she started writing the novel in 1944, in the midst of the London

Blitz, she soon came to feel that the stress of "that V-1 summer" would affect the quality of the novel and did not finish it until the war had ended (Glendinning 187). As the novel's primary setting, wartime London serves as the backdrop to a narrative fraught with apprehension. The novel centers on Stella Rodney, an independent woman in a relationship with Robert, an ex-solider. The narrative tension builds when Stella is approached by a mysterious man called Harrison, who tells her that Robert is a Nazi spy. After revealing himself to be a counterspy working for the British government, Harrison attempts to bribe Stella by telling her he will not turn Robert in if she agrees to leave Robert for him instead. While Stella initially refuses to believe Harrison's claims, she begins to covertly observe Robert for signs of his defection until Robert finally confesses that he is indeed passing state secrets to the Germans. When Robert tries to flee from Harrison by hiding on the rooftop of Stella's apartment, he either accidentally falls or purposefully jumps to his death; the text leaves the true nature of his death unanswered. Much of the novel's suspense comes less from its action than it does from the psychological strain Stella undergoes as she tries to deduce Robert's true identity.

The process of reading and comprehending this surface-level plot is often undermined by Bowen's syntax, which is convoluted and circuitous in form. Her language winds around double and even triple negatives, such as when Stella waits for Harrison to arrive at her apartment and wonders whether or not he will take her out to dinner: "his not having said so gave her no chance of saying she would on no account dine with him" (21). In this moment, Stella regrets not having the opportunity to rebuff an invitation that has not even been extended. Bowen frequently crafts such labyrinthine constructions to convey negative expressions, particularly those that deal with absence

and loss. In another striking passage, the novel describes the ever-growing number of citizens killed during the Blitz:

> Most of all the dead, from mortuaries, from under cataracts of rubble, made their anonymous presence – not as today's dead but as yesterday's living—felt through London… Absent from the routine which had been life, they stamped upon that routine their absence – not knowing who the dead were, you could not know which might be the staircase somebody for the first time was not mounting this morning, or at which street corner the newsvendor missed a face, or which trains and buses in the homegoing rush were this evening lighter by at least one passenger. (99)

These lines are significant not only for how they convey Bowen's complex syntax, but also in how they point to dislocating instances of absence and loss that pervade the novel. Bowen interrupts the phrase of making "presence felt" with her use of dashes, which at once calls attention to the absent presence of the dead and seems to impede any such presence from really being fully felt. Even as the dead imprint their presence on the continuing routine of life, another dash heightens the passage's contradictory effects and introduces an unknown second-person voice ("you could not know"). The dead impress their absence on ordinary details, altering the routine, but since "you" do not know who the dead are, you cannot know which part of the routine has changed. Others, such as the newsvendor, might know, but this knowledge is always held at bay. The absence of the dead has an effect, but this effect is itself absent since the particular dead cannot be known.

Due to passages such as this one, Bowen's writing in *The Heat of the Day* has been called "highly strained", to the point where her syntactical mannerisms cause her readers to become "uncomfortable" (Lee 164, 165). Daniel George Bunting, Bowen's reader at Jonathan Cape Publishing, feared the novel's readers would "be baffled completely" (Howard 181).[15] In response to such criticisms, Bowen defended her complicated style, writing in a letter to Jonathan Cape: "I'd rather keep the jars, 'jingles' and awkwardness – e.g. 'seemed unseemly', 'felt to falter'. They do to my mind express something. In some cases I want the rhythm to jar or jerk – to an extent, even, which may displease the reader" (qtd. in Ellmann 166). Despite its unsettling and disorienting effects, the novel's language does indeed "express something"; his reserves notwithstanding, Bunting went on to say that Bowen "succeeds time and again in expressing what has hitherto been inexpressible" (182). It is, ironically, the novel's very unreadability that allows it to articulate an experience of war that seems to lie outside the bounds of conventional language.

Even as *The Heat of the Day* seems to communicate that which seems incommunicable, Bowen acknowledges her doubts that the novel has fully succeeded in this task. She once said that the "overstrain" the novel's critics felt "probably came from a too high tension from my trying to put language to what for me was a totally new use, and what perhaps was, showed itself to be a quite impossible use" (283). Because of her novel's degree of unreadability, her "new use" of language threatens to fail, to remain "impossible". If traumatic events trouble their straightforward representation, they

[15] Bunting made four pages of notes that list some of the novel's most distressingly worded passages. He refers to her phrase "has been to be seen seeing", for instance, as "the pluperfect syphon" (182).

perpetually cause language to confront its own inadequacies to phrase trauma. I nonetheless contend that the very impossibility that concerns Bowen is what gives *The Heat of the Day* its ability to evoke notions of trauma. It is in the tension between the experience of trauma and the articulation of that experience where trauma may be creatively conveyed. The very acknowledgement of language's failings serves to express an experience of trauma; that is, Bowen's seemingly impossible language has the potential to speak of trauma's unspeakable quality.

The novel's "impossible" language is bound up with the act of reading, and by extension, with the act of interpretation – processes that tie into the critical reception of *The Heat of the Day*. The novel is frequently read through two interpretative frameworks: one which posits it as a response to the trauma of war, and one which views it as Bowen's "spy novel".[16] The novel's "impossible" language is bound up with the act of reading, and by extension, with the act of interpretation – processes that tie into the critical reception of *The Heat of the Day*. The novel is frequently read through two interpretative frameworks: one which posits it as a response to the trauma of war, and one which views it as Bowen's spy novel. As a recurring motif within the novel, the acts of reading and rereading link these two approaches, as each rests on the novel's essential unreadability in order to highlight Bowen's focus on trauma and loss. Scholars who focus on *The Heat of the Day* as a response to the Second World War frequently view its complicated syntax as a means of reinforcing the violent and disruptive effects of the London bombings. As Phyllis Lassner says, in wartime "the language of conventional

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[16] See, for example, Patrick Deer, *Culture in Camouflage: War, Empire, and Modern British Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 184; and Megan Faragher, "The Form of Modernist Propaganda in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day*, *Textual Practice* 21.7 (2013): 49-68.

fictions becomes an inadequate tool of self-expression…Language in this novel communicates only uncertainty" (123). Bowen's descriptions of the bombings prompt Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle to refer to *The Heat of the Day* as an example of "blitz-writing" (94). Jessica Gildersleeve likewise reads the narrative as reverberating with the "shuddering motion" of "a city at war" (114).

Readings of *The Heat of the Day* as a spy novel likewise focus on Bowen's tangled syntax. Such novels typically progress from apparently disparate fragments of information towards a more complete account of events. According to David Seed, spy narratives tend to "symbolically re-enact the establishment of a desired order threatened by malign forces" (121). While *The Heat of the Day* shares the spy genre's concern with issues of representation and plausibility, of people and things not quite being what they seem, it also conceals as much as it reveals. The novel partly obstructs any revelatory moments of meaning through its language; as Anna Teekell says, "The structure of the double negatives governs *The Heat of the Day* and underpins the novel's logic; it creates a space of suspense, of non-knowingness. Such negative grammar is symbolic of the novel's espionage-based epistemology: it is the grammar of Stella's refusal to believe Harrison's story, and her refusal to disbelieve it as well" (63).

It is this same syntactical structure, however, that undermines the spy novel's expository function. In his study of the genre, Alan Hepburn explains, "Espionage plots provide rules for their decipherment, a user's guide as it were, to help the fit reader read aright. Figured as games or puzzles, espionage narratives blur meaningful details with meaningless details. Interpretation requires vigilant separation of truth from lies" (xvi). *The Heat of the Day* confounds these expectations; there is no way to "read aright" in this

novel. Not only does its "impossible" language prevent such a reading, but as I will also discuss, the truth of the novel's events is not so easily separated from lies. It is in this ambiguity that the two readings of *The Heat of the Day* as a spy novel and as a war trauma novel coincide. As traumatic occurrences filter through the novel, they distort the process of looking for clues to find the truth. Rather than reestablish order and truth, Bowen's writing emphasizes a loss of certainty that she does not try to fill or replace.

One central way in which Bowen calls attention to this loss is through the question of whether or not the past could be "read" for clues. When Robert finally confesses his espionage to Stella, he responds to her dismay: "You'll have to reread me backwards, figure me out – you will have years to do that in, if you want to" (304). Robert intimates that Stella must retrospectively examine and reinterpret their relationship to locate possible evidence of his defection. Because of the novel's "impossible" language, the process of rereading is brought to bear on its readers as well as its characters. It is not only Stella who must reread; as Teekell points out, "Bowen's syntax forces the novel's reader, too, to reread not just the plot for missing clues but also the sentences themselves for meaning" (62). But the novel also engages with the act of rereading on a more problematic and profound level than simply searching the text, or the past, for meaning. As it is figured in the novel, the process of rereading obscures rather than uncovers motive and meaning.

Instead of presenting a past littered with clues waiting to be reread and reinterpreted, *The Heat of the Day* depicts an enigmatic past that may never be fully known. Robert and Stella's first meeting calls into question their very perceptions of the reality of the past. When they approach one another in either a crowded "bar or club –

afterwards they could never remember which", they "both spoke at once, unheard" (103, 104). As they begin to speak, a plane drops a bomb on a nearby building, leaving Stella and Robert speechless from the force of the detonation:

> It was the demolition of an entire moment: he and she stood at attention till the glissade stopped. What they *had* both been saying, or been on the point of saying, neither of them ever now were to know. Most first words have the nature of being trifling; theirs from having been lost began to have the significance of a lost clue. What they said next, what they said instead, they forgot: there are questions which if not asked at the start are not asked later; so those they never did ask. (104)

The moment of the blast resonates with the "unassimilated nature" of trauma, "the way it was precisely not known in the first instance" (Caruth *UE* 4). Although it leaves a trace in the form of a "lost clue", the passage questions whether this clue ever existed in the first place. Instead, the idea of the clue serves as a façade that gives weight and structure to a forgotten and irrevocable moment conditioned by traumatic experience. The loss of this moment eclipses any tangible, intelligible words, as the blast causes them to forget "what they said instead". What is more, the loss this passage describes is suggested even before the explosion occurs. An instance of unintelligibility arises in the instants leading up to the detonation when Stella and Robert "both speak at once, unheard". Speaking simultaneously, they cannot make out the other's words. While the bomb serves to underscore the loss of language, memory, and experience that characterizes the traumatic occurrence of Stella and Robert's meeting, their first words had already been lost. Although this smaller moment is not as noticeably disorienting as the falling bomb, the explosion highlights the possibilities of loss that already resided in their first meeting.

With its shattering force, the bomb causes an upheaval that gives the incomprehensibility of their first words a significant and impenetrable valence, for it prevents them from moving past that moment and starting their conversation anew. As such, it is not only the physical force of the bomb that they feel, but also the force of this loss, which comes to define their relationship. The idea of the missing clue, as a long-lost desire, attempts to locate an inaugurating moment that never existed and attains its significance through its very absence.

It is the inaccessibility of the beginning moment, its ghostly trace, which prompts Stella to go in search of it, although her search will never amount to more than a futile attempt to find something that will not be found. The event of Stella and Robert's first meeting is signaled through the awareness that something has happened that cannot really be understood, and therefore it cannot be easily or transparently read. As Stella considers events from her past, she muses:

> One could only suppose that the apparently forgotten beginning of any story was unforgettable; perpetually one was subject to the sense of there having had to be a beginning *somewhere*. Like the lost first sheet of a letter or missing first pages of a book, the beginning kept on suggesting what must have been its nature. One never was out of reach of the power of what had been written first. Call it what you liked, call it a miscarried love, it imparted, or was always ready and liable to impart, the nature of an alternative, attempted recovery or enforced second start to whatever followed. The beginning, in which was conceived the end, could not but continue to shape the middle part of the story, so that none of the realisations along that course were what had been expected, quite whole, quite final. (146)

This passage foregrounds the paradoxical forgetting of what should be unforgettable, so that the story's beginning remains unknown even as its impact continues to be felt. The forgotten beginning registers elements of trauma, as it is sensed only through its later effects, in its capability to "shape" the rest of the story. With the past figured as a book without its first pages, the notion of reading back for lost clues resurfaces. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle argue *The Heat of the Day* is paradigmatic of what they call the "retrolexic", which they define as "a work of reading or re-experiencing" that involves "remembering what never happened. In this way the retrolexic engages with a demand for reading back, for 'rereading backwards', for a rereading which at once doubles and obliterates any 'first reading'… It is a demand which, while figuring the starting-point of a reading or experience, cannot itself be situated" (89). In considering the novel as a retrolexic text, Bennett and Royle raise the important question of whether Bowen presents a past that has any grounding in reality.

The novel does not just emphasize the process of reading back, however; it also considers the implications this process has for the future. Even as Stella's forgotten beginnings persuade her to reread for moments that were possibly never there at all, their absence maintains a strong hold on what is to come. As Stella phrases it in the passage above, "One was never out of reach of the power of what had been written first." She views the beginning as informing the middle and the end of the story, and without the beginning, the story is never "quite whole, quite final". Instead, it remains ineluctably entangled with the missed or forgotten moment of origin. Since the story's beginning has never been rendered fully present, its ending will remain profoundly unresolved. Reading and rereading do not, then, fully elucidate the unknowable events in Stella's past, but

instead engender even more mysteries. Since the lingering ambiguities instigate further acts of rereading, Stella thus becomes immersed in a recurrent and unfulfilled process of decryption and decipherment.

The missing beginning therefore has implications for the story's end, or in the case of Stella's life, for her future. In particular, the novel resists closure, so that the events of Stella's life are bookended with uncertainty. Her complicated relationship with Harrison reflects this uncertainty. After Robert dies, Harrison flees without contacting Stella. Since Harrison was trailing Robert on the night of his death, he is the only person who knows whether or not Robert purposefully jumped or accidentally fell to his death. Thinking of Harrison, Stella realizes that with "their extraordinary relationship having ended in midair, she found she missed it – Harrison became the one living person she would have given anything to see. Ultimately, it was *his* silent absence which left her with absolutely nothing. She never, then, *was* to know what had happened?" (339-340). Like the notion of the forgotten beginning that persists in haunting Stella, Robert's death continues to be felt in its aftermath and is specifically experienced through its very irresolution and unknowability. Any meaning Stella may try to find in his death cannot be finalized, as Harrison's departure leaves her bereft and wondering. For Stella, it is not the "silent absence" of the dead that plagues her, but of the living, and yet she thinks of Harrison in a way that might befit a dead person: silent, out of reach, beyond knowledge or communication. Without him, Stella comes to identify a loss of meaning and knowledge that refuses to be reclaimed.

Harrison's absence leaves Stella searching her memory for clues of Robert's criminal past, "piecing and repiecing it together to try and make out something they had

not time to say – possibly had not had time to know. There still must be something that matters that one has forgotten, forgotten because at the time one did not realise how much it did matter. Yet most of all there is something one has got to forget – that is, if it is to be possible to live" (358). Stella's lack of closure causes her to revisit her relationship with Robert, and she attempts to "reread [Robert] backwards" after all. What she finds, however, is that there is nothing tangible in their past to read. If evidence of Robert's defection ever existed in the first place, Stella has forgotten it. Once again, Stella is left only with the suspicion that the trace of Robert's espionage must linger somewhere, even if such evidence remains just out of her line of sight. Although Stella wishes to remember, her statement "most of all there is something one has to forget – that is, if it is to be possible to live" aligns the process of recovery with the ability to forget.

In order to recover from Robert's death, Stella seems to need to engage with what Jay Winter calls "the necessary art of forgetting", or the process of separating from one's loss to begin to live again (115). Winter's view of the productive nature of forgetting is based on Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia. Freud defines mourning as an essential process for recovery, through which the mourning individual eventually comes to term with the loss. He characterizes melancholia, by contrast, as an arrested process in which the depressed and self-loathing individual continues to narcissistically identify with the lost person or object.[17] Trapped in such a state, the melancholic individual remains haunted by the past, unable to disassociate from what has been lost. Even as Stella expresses a desire to forget, her repeated efforts to read the past for lost

[17] As Freud says in his landmark essay "Mourning and Melancholia", "In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself" (246).

clues prevents her from doing so. Without the missing pieces of her relationship with Robert, she grieves over a loss she cannot fully comprehend. Her melancholy, furthermore, does not center on her loss of Robert so much as it does on her inability to know what happened in the past, and it enfolds her unrelentingly because she never will know ("she never, then, *was* to know). Stella's dilemma reflects a crucial and paradoxical aspect of traumatic forgetting: although she strives to remember what has been forgotten, she needs to forget in order to heal. And yet her impulse to keep reading back causes her to repeatedly encounter the frustrated trace of what she has forgotten or "possibly had not had time to know". The act of rereading prevents her state of melancholy from coming to an end; her failed efforts to reread the past maintain trauma as loss, as a non-teleological process that does not necessarily achieve a measure of resolution.

Stella's profound lack of closure is structurally reinforced by the novel's narrative, which never discloses the truth of the events that burden her. When Harrison suddenly returns, Stella implores him to fill in the gaps in her memory. Although she repeatedly asks him, "What happened?", Harrison only replies, "I don't remember" (361). He withholds any possibility that Stella will achieve closure for Robert's death, the true cause of which remains a mystery to both Stella and Bowen's readers. Without any further knowledge of whether Robert jumped or fell, Stella makes one final attempt to find closure as she tells Harrison, "I've wanted to be able to say goodbye to you: till this could be possible you've haunted me. What's unfinished haunts one; what's unhealed haunted one" (362). Her words reiterate her need to heal and reinforce the haunting quality of traumatic occurrence. If trauma, as Caruth says, is not known in the first instance, then "it returns to haunt the survivor later on" (*UE* 4). Stella's experiences

continue to possess her precisely because she cannot know them. While it looks as though she never will, it is also uncertain if she will receive the goodbye from Harrison she so strongly desires. In the midst of Stella and Harrison's conversation, an air raid strike begins and prevents Harrison from leaving. As their conversation continues, Harrison shifts the focus away from Robert and onto Stella by questioning her about her future. She demurs, ending their exchange as follows:

> "'I have always left things open. –As a matter of fact, though, I think the air raid's over.'
>
> 'In that case…' said Harrison, looking at his watch. 'Or would you rather I stayed till the All Clear?'" (363)

The passage cuts off with Harrison's question, forestalling the moment of his departure. The narrative thereby suspends the possibility of closure on two levels: in terms of its content, Stella receives no closure for the circumstances surrounding Robert's death, and in terms of its form, the novel refuses closure by denying its readers the knowledge of whether or not Stella's desired goodbye to Harrison ever takes place. With their goodbye held in abeyance, this moment, like Stella's life, is "left open", exposing an unhealed wound. Bowen's narrative does not yield to a simple understanding; it does not offer a transparent flash of knowledge that transmits meaning or closure. Instead, in its unreadability and its refusal to reveal the truth of the events it describes, *The Heat of the Day* conveys a darker, murkier, and more dubious representation of trauma and healing.

Stella's efforts to read and reread her past, then, remain unfinished and imperfect, unsettling the notion that she may locate long-lost clues in order to reveal the truth of Robert's betrayal. The novel's apprehensive stance on the act of reading is further echoed

in a subplot involving Louie, a young, working-class woman, and her friend, Connie. As an avid reader of newspapers, Connie is described in the novel as a careful and assiduous reader:

> Connie's reading of papers was for the most part suspicious; nothing was to get by unobserved by her. Her re-reading of everything was the more impressive because the second time, you were given to understand, what she was doing was reading between the lines. So few having this gift, she felt it devolved on her to use it, and was therefore a tiger for information. As to the ideas (as Louie now called the articles), Connie was a tooth-sucker, a keeper of open mind – they were welcome to sell her anything they could. (170)

Newspapers, as they are depicted here, cannot be completely trusted to explicitly convey the truth, and yet Connie's diligent rereading seems to posit an active process of reading that may discern whatever truth lies "between the lines." Like the spy narrative, the newspapers potentially contain a secret meaning that may be uncovered through the practice of close and vigilant reading. The interpretative process of reading would thus be generated by the hidden meanings that lay within the papers. For Connie, the belief that the articles contain tacit messages serves as a condition of possibility for the act of rereading itself. In other words, this belief spurs her to move beyond a surface-level reading of the newspaper's content, probing the articles to unlock a wealth of hidden information. The papers, furthermore, do not merely present facts, but according to Louie, the articles represent "ideas," underlying concepts and impressions that one could discern with an "open mind."

While Connie and Louie's attitude initially presumes an approach to rereading that seems to reveal the truth of the matter, the novel quickly undercuts this assumption. After Robert dies, Stella is called to give testimony at an inquest into his death. Although Stella attempts to recall the details of the night Robert died to the best of her ability, she does not mention Harrison or reveal Robert's espionage in an effort to preserve Robert's reputation. In this passage, Bowen presents only Stella's answers to the questions put before her and not the questions themselves, although the court's inquiries about Robert and his relationship with Stella can be inferred from her responses. The following lines are representative of Stella's testimony:

> "Yes, I have other men friends, I suppose…I beg your pardon; I mean yes, I have other men friends…." (340).
>
> "Yes, I have always tried to keep some drink in my flat, never to run quite out of it: one needs it…." (340).
>
> "No, I do not remember drinking more heavily than usual…. As far as I know, absolutely clear: I remember everything…. Is it unusual? I have a good memory…. (341).
>
> "No, I cannot remember whether he was carrying an electric torch: he did not usually…. Yes, I'm sorry; I agree that that is important. I must withdraw my statement that I remember everything" (342).

Stella's testimony continues in this vein for over three pages, and while the nervous, somewhat faltering responses she provides above convey the details of that night as she knows them, her words are misread: they generate false impressions regarding her conduct and personality. The court wrongly infers that Stella drinks heavily and

entertains "other men friends" besides Robert. By pointing to the inability to ever "remember everything" completely, Stella's statements, moreover, undermine one of the central purposes of the inquest, which is to uncover the truth and provide a sense of legal closure based on Stella's testimony. While she successfully prevents the court from suspecting Robert's treachery, she unwittingly misrepresents herself. Stella's testimony is therefore compromised by two lies: the lie she purposefully constructs by concealing Robert's defection and the unknowing lie the court infers about her conduct.

Despite the "suspicious" form of rereading Connie endorses, the falsehoods in Stella's testimony take on the appearance of truth as the newspapers disseminate the story. Louie, who meets and comes to admire Stella earlier in the novel, concludes after reading the news, "She had seemed so respectable…but there she had stood in court, telling them all. That was that; simply that again. There was nobody to admire: there *was* no alternative" (346). Given credibility by the newspapers, the story of "Stella's fall", as Louie thinks of it, becomes reduced to a single, seemingly indisputable fact. Though Stella's fall is, in this sense, metaphorical, it reiterates Robert's since the truth behind neither is ever fully disclosed. Coinciding with Stella's fall, however, is a false narrative that takes the place of and imitates truth. The newspapers disseminate a totalizing reading of Stella's testimony, one that is not a reading in the Derridean sense because it renders its meaning transparent. Nor does it engender the act of rereading because it appears to solidify one interpretation into truth. With "no alternative" interpretation, there is no need to read back. This is not to say that rereading will reveal the truth; as I discussed above, Stella's failed efforts to reread her past leave her in a state of melancholy. Nonetheless, the uncertainty surrounding Stella's efforts contributes to an ambiguous narrative

structure that conveys the dislocating effects of trauma as she experiences them. Stella may never discover the truths in her past, but her attempts to reread illustrate a possible truth about trauma – that it may not always come to be fully known.

If Bowen frames the legal inquest and the newspapers – the discourses that will ostensibly disclose the truth – as producing a singularly reductive version of events, she posits fiction as a discourse that calls for open-ended reading and interpretation. In a short piece entitled "Notes on Writing a Novel", Bowen reflects, "Plot is story. It is also 'a story' in the nursery sense = lie. The novel lies, in saying that something happened that did not. It must, therefore, contain uncontradictable truth, to warrant the original lie" (35). Bowen does not explicitly reveal what she means by the "uncontradictable truth"; in other words, she leaves it open to interpretation. It is a somewhat unreadable phrase in that it resists an easy definition, but this statement asks her readers to consider the relationship between writing, reading, truth, and lies. Later in the essay, Bowen builds on her discussion of the truth:

> "Plot must further the novel towards its object. What object? The non-poetic statement of a poetic truth.
>
> Have not all poetic truths already been stated? The essence of a poetic truth is that no statement of it can be final" (36).

With these quasi-aphoristic assertions, Bowen suggests that narrative structure brings out the truth that may reside in fictional discourses and the fiction that potentially hides in statements of truth. Fiction, especially difficult, "impossible" fiction, as Bowen called *The Heat of the Day*, foregrounds the complexities of reading and interpretation by shifting away from conventional narrative structures and disrupting the epistemological

foundations of reality. Fiction does not necessarily convey the veridical or literal truth, but instead it has the potential to convey another form of truth – a "poetic truth" that, in this case, stems from the novel's very denial of truth and closure. As with the stories of Stella's life that were never "quite whole" or "quite final", the poetic truth is never final, but calls for the continuous act, or as Derrida would say, the "infinite process", of reading.

III

If Bowen's "impossible" writing strove to capture a response to an unresolved trauma, Rebecca West's impossible task is to convey the difficulty of writing about a trial that refuses to be easily understood. Late in the summer of 1946, West traveled to Germany to attend the closing sessions of the Nuremberg trial of the major Nazi war criminals, having arranged to write a series of articles on the proceedings for the *New Yorker*.[18] She later revised and expanded these articles for her 1955 collection *A Train of Powder*, which showcases her writings on multiple trials.[19] When West arrived at Nuremberg, the trial was in its eleventh month and close to condemning twelve of the Nazi war criminals to death and another seven to lifelong prison sentences. Although she was there to report, her writing shows evidence of a struggle to relate Nuremberg as an experience she can comprehend. In *A Train of Powder*, West writes of the trial:

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[18] The American occupation authorities conducted twelve trials in Nuremberg between 1946 and 1949. In this chapter, I focus on the first, which is the one West attended and which is commonly referred to as the Nuremberg trial.

[19] In addition to the Nuremberg Trial, which is covered in a three-part series entitled "Greenhouse with Cyclamens," *A Train of Powder* also includes West's reports on three other trials for a lynching in North Carolina, a murder in England, and the espionage activity of a British telegrapher.

> Conducted by officials sick with the weariness left by a great war, attended by only a handful of spectators, inadequately reported, constantly misinterpreted, it was an unshapely event, a defective composition, stamping no clear image on the mind of the people it had been designed to impress. It was one of the events which do not become an experience. (246)

West speaks to a fundamental experiential gap at the heart of what was supposed to be one of the most vigorous attempts at achieving postwar justice. My discussion of her Nuremberg writings will focus largely on this passage. I will consider how West uses her terms "event" and "experience" as well as the implications her inability to assimilate Nuremberg into a meaningful experience has on her efforts to represent it. West's characterization of the trial as an inassimilable experience, I will maintain, resonates with Caruth's description of the traumatic event, and it is through this alignment that West's writings regarding Nuremberg remain compellingly open-ended.

The Nuremberg trial is often said to have been groundbreaking. Although the 1929 Kellogg-Briand pact declared aggressive warfare a crime, no precedent for an international trial of war criminals existed for Nuremberg to follow. Representatives from the Allied forces therefore came together to establish and then oversee the trial's proceedings. As Shoshanna Felman observes:

> At Nuremberg, history was asked in an unprecedented manner to account in court for historical injustices that were submitted for the first time to the legal definition of a crime. The prosecution and the judgment conceptualized as crimes atrocities and abuses of power that until then had not been justiciable: 'crimes against humanity,' crimes committed at the time of war against civilians, injustices that a

> totalitarian regime inflicts on its own subjects as well as on outsiders and opponents. (183)

The trial's success in redressing these crimes and administering justice has been widely debated.[20] At the onset of the trial, the British judge Norman Birkett predicted that Nuremberg would become "the greatest trial in history" (Conot xi). British chief prosecutor Sir Hartley Shawcross declared the trial would provide "an authoritative and impartial record to which future historians may turn for truth" (Douglas 2). Critical responses to the trial, however, show concern for more than the factual record the trial established. Hannah Arendt questions the very possibility of tailoring a judicial process to fit Nazi crimes that "explode the limits of the law" (*Correspondence* 54). For Arendt, the guilt of the Nazi war criminals, "in contrast to all criminal guilt, oversteps and shatters any and all legal systems…We are simply not equipped to deal, on a human, political level, with a guilt that is beyond crime and an innocence that is beyond goodness or virtue". While the legal proceedings might have been groundbreaking, Arendt's words suggest the magnitude of the crimes the trial addressed were also viewed as unprecedented and heretofore considered unimaginable. Her unease stems from the disturbing possibility that the no trial could adequately pass judgment or bring justice to such an unfathomable degree of culpability.

It was into this rather murky climate that West arrived. The way she describes the trial as an experiential gap resonates with recent theories of trauma and recalls the veiled

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[20] The complexity of this debate lies outside the scope of my discussion, which primarily focuses on West's missing experience and how she attempts to represent this absence. For an additional overview of the trial, see Lawrence Douglas's *The Memory of Judgment: Making Law and History in the Trials of the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) and Donald Bloxam's *Genocide on Trial: War Crimes Trials and the Formation of Holocaust History and Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

connection between trauma and the law that Felman has discussed at length in *The Juridical Unconscious*. According to Felman, in the encounter with trauma, trials cannot help but unwittingly reproduce the very structures of the traumatic events they seek to redress. An unassimilated traumatic history intrudes upon the proceedings, and unknowingly, "the trial thus repeats the trauma, reenacts its structures" (5).[21] If Felman focuses on an unassimilated traumatic history at the core of the trial's composition, West calls attention to what was for her an unassimilated experience. As I will discuss, her inability to view Nuremberg as an experience corresponds to her incapacity to link the trial to her schemas of justice and punishment. Her writings of the trial do not attempt to fit it into these schemas, but reinforce and repeat its non-experience.

The critical treatment of West's Nuremberg essays has questioned the significance of her nonintegrated experience and the implications this has on her role as a journalist. While it is generally agreed that West struggled to write the trial, critics have debated what, exactly, is missing from her experience of Nuremberg. In one of the earliest studies of West's Nuremberg writings, Margaret Stetz observes that West returned to Nuremberg in 1949 to assess the effect the trials might have had in postwar Germany, and "still not at peace herself on this matter", West returned to the trials six years later as she put together *A Train of Powder* (230). Noting "the high level of ignorance about the Holocaust that continued in Britain throughout the 1950s", Stetz

[21] Felman specifically looks at the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961 as paradigmatic of a crisis in the law. In the case of Eichmann, Felman maintains that the law is asked to respond to claims "that go far beyond the simple and cognitive need to decide about Eichmann's individual guilt or innocence" (4). The law is asked not only to judge the entire history of Nazi persecution, it is also summoned to act in response to the historical trauma of the Holocaust, and the Eichmann trial therefore implicates the law in processes that are ignored or remain unavailable to collective consciousness.

ultimately condemns West for not writing more about the victims of the Holocaust and goes so far as to say that her essays represent "an abdication of journalistic responsibility" (234). More recently, however, Lyndsey Stonebridge has claimed that Nuremberg took place too close to the Holocaust for Europe to come to terms with it as a historical event, and therefore the trial occurred "before there were witnesses, before the trauma was felt as trauma" (31).[22] Stonebridge argues that West's essays "register the unconscious structures of feeling that simmered both inside and outside the courtroom in Nuremberg" and reads the lack of victim and witness testimony as the cause of a missing sense of justice that West unconsciously perceives (26).[23] Since West cannot precisely identify that the absence of these witnesses contributes to her missing experience, Stonebridge maintains that Nuremberg "failed to deliver an aesthetics of judgment adequate to the crime" (9).

For West, however, the trial's inassimilable experience is not only a question of whether justice had been done. Although she was against capital punishment in general, she wrote in her second article for the *New Yorker*, "The Birch Leaves Are Falling", "One would not alter the death sentence. The future must be protected. The ovens where

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[22] Holocaust survivors did testify during the Nuremberg trials, but the focus on the importance of the victim as witness did not come to the fore until the Eichmann trial. See Hannah Arendt's *Eichman in Jerusalem* (New York: Penguin, 1964) and especially Felman's *The Juridical Unconscious*.

[23] Stonebridge's reading resonates with Felman's discussion of trauma and the law in that Stonebridge detects unconscious sub-currents of the Nuremberg trial in West's writings. The two differ, however, on the effects trauma has on the legal system. For Felman, the traumatic repetition that is enacted within the legal setting provides a stage for expressing what has previously been expressionless; although the trial will never master the trauma, the legal proceedings enact a dramatic representation of trauma that leads to "a new historical and legal consciousness" (164). Stonebridge, however, argues, "as much as historical and judicial comprehension can be transformed by trauma…it can also be thwarted or blocked by the effort to contain it" (6). In other words, the trial does not always shed light on the collective unconscious.

the innocent were baked alive must remain cold forever; the willing stokers, so oddly numerous, it appears, must be discouraged from lighting them again" (99). Even though West had difficulty formulating the trial as an experience, she does not describe the final verdict of the trial as a failure. These lines further register some awareness of the atrocities the Holocaust victims endured, even if they do not figure at the heart of West's essays. As her biographer Victoria Glendinning points out, West "approved of what was done at Nuremberg: it was necessary both to avenge the victims of Nazism and to reinstate the rule of law" (181).

Other interpretations of West's reports do not focus on the absence of the victims at Nuremberg but instead position West as a crucial witnessing voice of the trial itself. This line of thought maintains that if West did not actively or consciously attest to the victims, she offered a perspective on the trial that spoke to the larger implications of her historical moment. Debra Rae Cohen, for instance, sees in West's writings a form of witnessing that speaks to Cold War tensions and the Allies' growing power. She maintains that if West described Nuremberg as "an unshapely event", this is because West believes "the wrong lesson" has been derived from the trial (160); namely, that it reinforced the Allied nations' authority rather than attesting to ethical considerations of the law. In Cohen's thorough reading of the substantial revisions West made to her *New Yorker* essays as she prepared them for publication in *A Train of Powder*, Cohen argues that West "reads order into history" by retrospectively imposing historical meaning on the trial. Ravit Reichman emphasizes West's position as a witness ever more, claiming West provides "a sense of what it felt like to bear witness to a moment of historic justice…Engaging Nuremberg as an event that needs to be *experienced* rather than

simply reported (or recorded), West suggests that it is the specific responsibility of the writer to take seriously the task of creating a legal event worth remembering" (104, italics original).

Each of these critics conscientiously puts forth a rigorous and carefully reasoned response to West's Nuremberg essays, but my sense of West goes in a different direction. West's essays seem, to me, significant precisely because Nuremberg, as an event, never becomes an experience for her. Her phrasing of the trial as "one of the events which do not become an experience" did not appear until *A Train of Powder* – although as I will shortly discuss, resonances of this description are present in her earlier reports – so that any historical retrospect she might have come to possess did not necessarily allow her to fully articulate the trial into a meaningful experience. West writes of the trial in an ambiguous and uncertain way, and I maintain that the effort to read her reports does not entirely uncover what was missing about her experience. Rather, it is the sense that something is missing in the first place that gives her essays weight. The experiential gap West describes does not need to be filled or sutured, but acknowledged for the ways in which her uncertainty and incomprehension affect her efforts to represent the trial. West had difficulty reading Nuremberg as an experience to be understood, and that, in turn, makes her discussion of the trial difficult to read. The phrase "one of the events which do not become an experience" contains within it a degree of unreadability, for West does not explicitly define what she means by the terms "event" and "experience". It is unclear why an event might not become an experience, or how it could become one. The significance of her phrase largely lies in its lack of clarity; this statement, with its nontransparent

meaning, reinforces her way of formulating a radical break in how she understands experience.

In *A Train of Powder*, West recognizes and formulates a distinction between her notions of event and experience. She writes, "We all know there are some events which become experience and others which do not: some events which give us information about the universe and ourselves, and some which tell us nothing" (*TP* 138). In these terms, an event must convey knowledge of some kind for it to become a meaningful experience. West figures a kind of communication taking place, one in which the event must "tell" us something if it is to be experienced. This line of thinking resonates with what Walter Benjamin calls "the nature of every real story" in "The Storyteller". For Benjamin, the story "contains, openly or covertly, something useful", such as a "moral", "practical advice," or a "proverb or maxim" (86). Part of West's difficulty in writing the trial stems from her belief that it has not conveyed anything "useful". Rather, it tells her nothing, and she is left to write of the uncertainty that lingers in its silence. If Nuremberg is not an experience, it refuses to be shaped into a story, at least not in the terms Benjamin proposes. Thus, for West Nuremberg is "unshapely", a "defective composition". Benjamin goes on to say that stories should provide "counsel" for their readers, although he notes that the notion of "having counsel" is becoming outmoded "because the communicability of experience is decreasing. In consequence we have no counsel either for ourselves or for others." Nuremberg does not "speak" to West; it does not offer any counsel for what kind of experience it should become. Nor does West offer counsel for how to interpret the trial as an experience in her essays; but instead, she allows the trial to retain its incommunicability. It is not just that the communicability of

her experience is decreasing, as Benjamin says, but that she does not appear to encounter a knowable experience at all.

Because West does not succeed in understanding Nuremberg as an experience, her essays put pressure on the idea that the trial could be plainly written. The highly regulated structure of the trial has been said to aid in the processes of writing and reporting on juridical proceedings. According to Donald Bloxam, historic war crime trials such as Nuremberg have generally been "an intrinsic part of making sense of a monstrous and immensely complex past" (ix). In its function of addressing crimes of great magnitude, the war trial has the potential to provide a logical account of the illogical events it seeks to redress. The trial's purpose of "making sense", moreover, coincides with an expository form of narrative. Laurel Leff maintains that trials are particularly well suited for journalistic writing because they are organized around "a satisfying narrative arc: they open, they close, with moments of drama (and tedium) in between. Most important, they give resolution in the form of a verdict. The Nuremberg trials had the additional allure of offering an explanation for the cataclysm the world had just endured" (82). This formulation suggests that because trials follow a general format, only the specific details of each case need to be filled in to what is essentially a preexisting outline. Gloria G. Fromm further argues that Nuremberg specifically gave West "a ready-made structure", one that would place her writing within the confines of "limits or boundaries established by certain known fact" (51).

West's essays, however, do not easily satisfy the narrative arc the trial potentially represents. This arc posits a structurally teleological rendering of the trial, beginning with factual evidence and ending with the verdict. West's first *New Yorker* article,

"Extraordinary Exile" problematizes the task of organizing the trial into a straightforward narrative: "How much easier would we journalists have found our task at Nuremberg if only the universe had been less fluid, if anything had been absolute, even so simple a thing as the sight we had gone to see – the end of the trial" (New Yorker 99). West points to the difficulty of trying to pin down a constantly shifting world, of imposing order on what stubbornly remains unfixed. The end of the trial might initially seem "simple", for it is at this point, after the crimes have been exposed and the verdict is handed down, that the trial promises a measure of resolution. Yet West's focus on the fluidity of her surroundings belies the apparent simplicity of the trial's conclusion.

West's difficulty in writing the trial stems from her hesitancy to speak of it in terms of absolutes, but also from a more profound uncertainty that it may be adequately written at all. In her second article for the *New Yorker*, "The Birch Leaves Are Falling", West writes, "What did we see in the courtroom? Everybody knows by now. It is no longer worth telling: it was not worth telling if you knew too little; it could not be told if you knew too much" (103). While "everybody knows" the factual details of the trial, such as the identities of the defendants, the crimes they committed, and the punishments they received, these details do not necessarily add up to an experience. If anything, the trial seems oversaturated with the information that "everybody knows" to the extent that this information has been robbed of meaning. Attempts to speak of the trial thus become devalued until it is "no longer worth telling". The problem of telling what happened, of integrating the event into language and narrative, does not only lie in what is not said, but also in that it is possible to say "too much". It does not matter if those who would speak of the trial possess a lack or an excess of knowledge, for either way, it cannot be

sufficiently conveyed. Instead of attempting to clarify or articulate what cannot be told, West calls attention to the inassimilable nature of the trial's experience by refusing to bring it into a stable system of understanding, one that is based on established infrastructures of language and reference.

If one of Nuremberg's functions was to make sense of the past, West's essays undo this purpose by exposing lingering tensions she detects within the trial's proceedings. These tensions are particularly well reflected in her descriptions of the Nazi officials condemned at Nuremberg. In *A Train of Powder*, West states that "all the court required" was "an explanation" for the crimes that had been committed (60). She nonetheless goes on to suggest that Nuremberg did not provide one, at least not one that could explain the reasoning behind the crimes. Watching the defendants receive their sentences, West is surprised by how stoic they appear:

> We were going to hang eleven of these eighteen men, and imprison the other seven for ten, fifteen, twenty years, or for life; but we had no idea why they had done what they did…We had learned what they did, beyond all doubt, and that is the great achievement of the Nuremberg trial. No literate person can now pretend that these men were anything but abscesses of cruelty. But we learned nothing about them that we did not know before, except that they were capable of heroism to which they had no moral right, and that there is nothing in the legend that a bully is always a coward. (60)

For West, it is not as if Nuremberg failed to reveal the actions of these men or bring them to justice; it is that the trial failed to adequately frame their motives in a way she could understand. The questions of what and how were largely answered, but not the question

of why. In other words, the trial might have served an expository function, but nevertheless, West does not find an explanation in Nuremberg that accounts for the crimes it redressed. Even the defendants refuse to fit within the confines of what West initially sees as their conventional antagonistic roles. Despite the crimes they have committed, she cannot view them in absolute or unconditional terms. By showing "a heroism to which they had no moral right" and proving false "the legend that a bully is always a coward", the defendants disrupt the familiar maxims that condition West's understandings of guilt and punishment.

In West's Nuremberg essays, the defendants often transmit a sense of opacity that continues to defy her expectations and prevents her from discussing the trial in terms of absolutes. Of the nineteen men on trial, Hermann Göring, the highest ranking Nazi official charged at Nuremberg, appears especially perplexing in West's first description of the defendants:

> And though one had read surprising news of Göring for years, he still surprised. He was so very soft. Sometimes he wore a German Air Force uniform, and sometimes a light beach suit in the worst of playful taste, and both hung loosely on him, giving him an air of pregnancy. He had thick brown young hair, the coarse bright skin of an actor who has used grease paint for decades, and the preternaturally deep wrinkles of the drug addict. It added up to something like the head of a ventriloquist's dummy. He looked infinitely corrupt, and acted naïvely. (*TP* 5-6)

This passage signals a disconnection between the ways in which West expects Göring to appear and how he actually appears before the court. Even though she knows he is

capable of surprising, she is still surprised; what she has read of Göring in the past does not fully prepare her for her present encounter with him. West describes Göring in contradictory terms, as simultaneously corrupt and naïve. Almost comical in appearance, like a puppet without actions of its own, the once-powerful Göring is nonetheless being held accountable for his past crimes. His clothing fluctuates between military and civilian, but he fulfills neither role any more; he is instead a war criminal on the eve of his sentence. Göring is surprising because there is no clearly defined prototype of how such a person should look.

West's further renditions of Göring do not rectify the initial contradictions she detects in his appearance. When he makes his final appearance in court and learns he received the death sentence, West writes, "At this last moment that he would be seen by his fellow men it was not evident that he was among the most evil of human beings that have ever been born. He simply appeared as a man bravely sustaining the burden of fear" (59). West seems to believe that evil exists in Göring, yet he continues to perplex her because he does not appear as a personification of evil.[24] She seems to identify with his fear of impending death, a fear that renders his evilness opaque and confronts West's expectations of a more general and anonymous form of evil. The defendants' unanticipated personae, and Göring's in particular, cannot be easily integrated into West's existing structures of meaning. As Irene Smith Landsman says, "when we

[24] Nearly two decades later, Hannah Arendt will make a similar statement after observing Eichmann's trial, characterizing Eichmann as "the banality of evil" (*Eichmann in Jerusalem* 252). Arendt claims Eichmann's participation in genocide stemmed from the failure or absence of the faculties of sound thinking and judgment rather than a malevolent will to do evil. While Arendt makes a philosophical statement about the complicity between evil and the failure of judgment, West, as Reichman says, "offer more than a reflection of banal evil: she actively fashions this banality herself, giving us some of our most unlikely descriptions of the men in the dock" (116). It is these unlikely, often strange descriptions that reflect the trial's obscurity for West.

experience events that don't fit our schemas, or violate our assumptions, or shatter our illusions, we experience a crisis of meaning. Either an event must be interpreted and explained in such a way as to fit our schemas, which is a difficult and painful task, or our schemas must be altered, an even more daunting task" (18). If Nuremberg was for West an event "which did not become an experience", this is partly because aspects of the trial do not fully coincide with her epistemological frameworks. Her perception of the defendants' behavior at the trial does not align with an absolute or unconditional definition of evil, despite the evil nature of the crimes for which they are being condemned. Nor does West's writing attempt to reconcile this disparity through the ways Landsman notes above. She does not explain away the shocking heroism she sees in the defendants as they hear their verdicts, and she does not offer an interpretation that interprets Göring's strange demeanor in light of the evil actions he has committed. Instead, her essays maintain the tension between concrete systems of knowledge on the one hand and disturbing and unpredictable events and people on the other. In this way, West's descriptions of the trial leave the crisis of experience she encounters open and unresolved.

West's writing, therefore, continues to challenge the notion that the trial structurally follows a narrative arc, ending in resolution once the verdict is expressed. In *A Train of Powder*, West adds to her initial descriptions of the trial an account of the time she spent in Europe after it concluded. This account evokes an impression that the time West and her colleagues spent at trial has not remained firmly in the past. During a visit to Prague, for instance, West met several fellow journalists and lawyers at a British film festival. She describes their viewing of the film *Brief Encounter* thusly:

> "…there was drowsiness in the air when an American voice spoke loudly out of the darkness. A minor character had crossed the screen and at the sight this voice was saying in horror, 'By God, that man looks just like Göring.' It was one of the American lawyers from Nuremberg, who had fallen asleep and had awakened to see the screen as a palimpsest with the great tragedy imposed on the small. The trial had begun to retreat into the past. Soon none of us, we thought, would ever think of it, save when we dreamed of it or read about it in books" (65).

Göring's image returns here as a ghostly revenant of the trial. West's earlier description of Göring as "surprising" takes on a new relevancy, as the unbidden recollection of his appearance catches her colleague by surprise during an unguarded and quotidian moment. In this shocking encounter, Göring comes to take on an uncanny quality; as with Freud's definition of the uncanny, the actor's resemblance to Göring is frightening precisely because of its unsettling familiarity. The memory of Göring emerges "as something which ought to have been kept concealed but which has nevertheless come to light" ("Uncanny" 148). Even after his death, the idea of Göring remains ominously present and animate, and it is this indeterminate range between life and death, presence and absence, that constitutes the haunting effect West describes. The ability of fragmented aspects of Nuremberg to suddenly recur, such as this mistaken impression of Göring, puts pressure on the notion that the trial contains a narrative arc that firmly ends in resolution.[25] While the trial seems to recede into the past, it is not so easily forgotten. Nuremberg retains its

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[25] Although Göring was sentenced to death by hanging, he committed suicide the night before his scheduled execution. His suicide arguably confounds the sense of closure offered by the verdict. The death penalty, as the dénouement to an atrocious series of crimes, is instead undermined by the act of taking his own life.

impact as a "palimpsest", as West calls it, layered with traces that are still faintly visible and have the potential to resurface unexpectedly.

The uncanny, haunting quality in the passage West describes above comes to take on certain structural resemblances with trauma. This is not to psychologize West or the nameless lawyer – I do not intend this discussion as a form of diagnosis of post-traumatic stress – but instead to say that West's writings on Nuremberg resonate with the notion of trauma as an event that is never quite fully known or anticipated. Her essays point to the difficulty she had in bringing the trial into preexisting frameworks of understanding and in grasping the trial as an experience she could comprehend. In labeling Nuremberg "one of the events which do not become an experience", West evokes the implicit force of the event itself. As Caruth notes, those who have lived through trauma sometimes discuss the traumatic event as though it has come to possess them; symptoms of trauma "reflect the direct imposition on the mind of the unavoidable reality of horrific events, the taking over of the mind, psychically and neurobiologically, by an event that it cannot control" (*UE* 58). The traumatic event acquires agency and influence over the mind, which gives trauma its haunting quality and prevents it from being completely known or understood. The ways in which West writes of the trial calls to mind this quality of trauma. One of the striking features of her formulations of Nuremberg is her attribution of agency to the event itself. It is often the event that acts as the subject of her sentences: an event may "give us information about ourselves and the universe", but Nuremberg "stamp[ed] no clear image on the mind of the people it had been designed to impress". Even as she acknowledges that the event was purposefully "designed", she does not say by whom.

West positions the event as speaking, or more notably, not speaking, lying beyond her reach to master or interpret it as an experience.

Caruth's characterization of trauma as outside of the mind's control evokes Derrida's discussion of the event since he not only notes the way "the event is first of all *that which* I do not first of all comprehend", but also that "the event is first of all *that* I do not comprehend" ("Autoimmunity" 90, emphasis original). Derrida goes on to say that "any event worthy of its name, even if it is a 'happy' event, has within it something that is traumatizing. An event always inflicts a wound in the everyday course of history, in the ordinary repetition and anticipation of all experience" (96). In Derrida's view, an event in the strongest sense of the term is unforeseen and unknown, arising when something happens that cannot quite be experienced. The event, then, remains un-appropriable; it comes as a surprise, as it cuts through preconceived notions of experience and thereby disrupts an understanding of experience in the first place.

In this way, the event lies outside of any efforts to control or know it. If the effects of trauma can be aligned with the notion of the event, I further maintain that these terms may also be discussed through the idea of the unreadable. In the way that I understand them, the unreadable and the traumatic function through a similar logic that confounds epistemological expectations. If it is only through its loss of experience that the event is experienced at all, it is only in the unreadable moments that reading potentially happens. Both concepts are somewhat paradoxically approached through their very incomprehension. The traumatic event cannot be read. Trauma displaces our role as agents who are capable of interpreting it, as the event of trauma is signaled through the awareness that something has happened that cannot really be understood.

Although we may read West's descriptions of the trial, West's Nuremberg may not be read. It remains, for her, an unassimilated experience, one that she does not try to explain. Through her formulations of the trial and its defendants, she retains the uncertainty and ambiguity she felt at Nuremberg. The trial was, for West, an "unshapely event, a defective composition", but she does not attempt to give it shape or correct its form – and indeed, her writing suggests such an effort would not be possible. She instead acknowledges the agency the event seems to possess, offering a testament to its strange and amorphous power.

IV

My discussion of Elizabeth Bowen and Rebecca West has addressed the problem of creating a coherent and meaningful narrative explanation for trauma and these authors' exposure of the difficulty of such a task. In particular, I have noted a profound lack of closure in Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* and West's Nuremberg essays that refuse to integrate narratives of trauma into a comprehensible form. By confounding Stella's attempts to read her past for lost clues, Bowen creates a character who is mercilessly plagued by unknown and forgotten events. Her self-styled "impossible" writing, with its syntactical twists and turns, confounds a simple reading of her novel even as it conveys the inexpressible nature of trauma. West's approach to writing the Nuremberg trial calls attention to the contradictions and tensions she sensed there without attempting to explain them away. She leaves Nuremberg open as a non-experience, an event that derives significance precisely from her inability to know it. In the writings of both authors, I detect a literary framework that acknowledges the ways in which trauma eludes our

understanding and fails to be assimilated into our experiences. Their writing casts light upon an essential gap at the center of traumatic experience, without ever filling up this gap in a finalized or authoritative way.

While the works of Bowen and West displace the attempt to know or speak of the traumatic event, I do not intend this discussion as a nihilistic disavowal of all meaning or experience. West, for example, acknowledges a fundamental need to make meaning out of events that remain cryptic and indecipherable. She closes the final passage of her Nuremberg essays in *A Train of Powder* with the lines: "brave the men who, in making the Nuremberg trial, tried to force a huge and sprawling historical event to become comprehensible. It is only by making such efforts that we survive" (250). The fact that Nuremberg never coalesces into an experience in terms West may understand suggests this effort has, at least to some degree, failed her. And yet despite its failure – or perhaps because of it – West emphasizes the need to try.

It is, of course, possible to heal from trauma and to express an event that once seemed beyond the reach of expression. At the same time, however, the often violent disruption of experience may potentially open up a creative space of exploration. As Caruth writes:

> The trauma thus requires integration…for the sake of cure. But on the other hand, the transformation of the trauma into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one's own, and others' knowledge of the past, may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall. (153)

While the loss of the trauma's force serves as a productive function of healing, Caruth continues that beyond this loss "there is another, more profound, disappearance: the loss, precisely, of the event's essential incomprehensibility, the force of its *affront to understanding*" (154). In the attempt to integrate a traumatic event into rational thought and language, the elusive quality of trauma disappears. Following this line of thought, Caruth notes that "the refusal of understanding, then, is also a fundamentally creative act" and that "the attempt to gain access to a traumatic history, then, is also the project of listening beyond the pathology of individual suffering, to the reality of a history that in its crises can only be perceived in inassimilable forms" (155, 156).

This creative act articulates the disorienting effects of trauma and the possibility that some experiences will not be known. Bowen and West offer examples of writing that showcases the inability to move on from trauma or to frame it as a coherent experience. In *The Heat of the Day*, Stella fails to find closure, but the novel nonetheless speaks to the recurring and melancholic quality of her traumatic encounter. And while Nuremberg remains a non-experience for West, she manages to speak of its absence even if she cannot speak of the event itself. Throughout this chapter, I have also been tracing the ways in which these texts present themselves as unreadable and, in turn, challenge the act of reading. I have chosen to focus on Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* and West's Nuremberg essays because they are, in a particular sense, unreadable. Neither text conveys an easily understood notion of reality or experience, but if, as Derrida asserts, "unreadability does not arrest reading", these texts may be read instead for a difficult and nuanced representation of trauma that carries the force of its haunting qualities and its failure to be understood. The resolution or meaning of the texts might not be made clear,

but rather than reading them for clarity, I read them for complexity, for the confusion they engender. I maintain that it is in the midst of this incertitude that we potentially come closest to grasping the non-experience of trauma. Like Stella's thwarted attempts at closure and West's inability to comprehend the trial, the experience may always remain elusive and attempts to express it may always fail.

In the writing of trauma, it is, perhaps, this failure that is the point.

2

Testimony: The Poetry After Apartheid in Antjie Krog's *Country of my Skull*

I

In April of 1996, poet and journalist Antjie Krog witnessed the first hearings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Krog had been asked to report on the proceedings by the South African Broadcasting Company (SABC), and for two years, she travelled with the Commission throughout the country, covering the hearings for the radio program *AM Live*. After a few weeks, however, Krog's continual exposure to the "accumulated grief" of the witness testimonies caused her to experience what she refers to as a "nervous breakdown" (*Country* 50). Krog chronicles her breakdown in *Country of my Skull* (1998), a genre-bending text that incorporates semi-fictionalized memoir, direct testimony, poetry and historical accounts of the Commission.

Central to both the text and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) are the questions of what it means to give testimony and to listen to stories of others. Krog figures the testimonial act as dialogic, taking place between a speaker and an attentive listener, but at the same time, her own nervous breakdown points to the challenge of listening and responding to traumatic testimonies. In her role as a reporter, Krog listens and observes, attempting to "read" and interpret the testimonies she hears; yet at times, the painful stories threaten to engulf her, and in these moments, her ability to decipher the testimonies collapses. As Krog reflects on her own distressed response to the hearings,

her readings of the testimonies do not always result in a process of uncovering sense and meaning. Instead, she frequently calls attention to lacunae within the testimonies themselves, to what cannot or what will not be said. *Country of my Skull* thus challenges us to consider, and possibly to re-orient, the interpretative practices through which we ascribe meaning to and engage with what we witness. The text initiates uneasy encounters with a historical crisis that is not fully resolved – a crisis that, for Krog, is ineluctably tied to language. In *Country of my Skull*, Krog explores both the capabilities and limitations of language to address the past, expanding on instances where testimonies and stories are interrupted or fall silent. She does not purport to recover the past or resolve its conflicts, nor does she treat the narratives that emerge from the hearings as objects of knowledge, fully accessible and comprehensible to readers who approach them from positions of distance or objectivity. For Krog, the encounter with testimony erases any such claim to objectivity, as traumatic histories impact both witnesses and their listeners.

This chapter, then, continues to take up the concern of how to speak of and to a traumatic past, but here I also begin to consider how writers such as Krog imaginatively approach the difficulty of representing trauma. Krog confronts the dilemma of accessing and understanding traumatic experience, a problem that Elizabeth Bowen and Rebecca West shared as they each struggled to come to terms with postwar Europe. The writings of Bowen and West emphasize the impasse between traumatic experience and its representation, but Krog attempts to move past this impasse in *Country of my Skull*. While Krog often foregrounds the inadequacies of language, she does not shroud the past in silence. For Krog, the processes involved with narrating and testifying to trauma take

the inaccessibility of trauma as a starting point, one that allows her to creatively engage with witness testimony within *Country of my Skull*. Krog's contemplation of the struggle to testify to the past leads her to produce new forms of writing: with its blend of genres, *Country of my Skull* suggests that no single form is capable of encompassing an expression of trauma, and all of them – memoir, journalism, testimony, and poetry – break down and are transformed in the process. Throughout the text, for instance, stream-of-consciousness passages of memoir-writing metamorphose into fragments of actual TRC testimony. In other sections, Krog's prose reflections lead into poems she composes in response to the TRC. The text's ruptured, multi-genre style serves as an effort to convey the expressive possibilities found within testifying before the TRC. Testifying, for Krog, is therefore a dynamic, dialogic, and open-ended process, one that is potentially transformative. Instead of trying to eradicate or assimilate traumatic disruptions, she creatively expands on them, viewing silences and interruptions as part of and even necessary to the effort to testify and tell a story.

The ability to narrate the past drives one of the central premises of the TRC, which intervenes in a complicated nexus of debates about how to balance the sometimes competing demands for truth, justice, and reconciliation. At the center of these demands is the imperative of affording victims the opportunity to articulate their experiences in a moderated, state-mandated setting. The act of bearing witness is often viewed as the cornerstone of the TRC; as Priscilla Hayner says, the hearings "seem to satisfy – or at least *begin* to satisfy – a clear need of some victims to tell their stories and be listened to" (135). By creating a space in which victims may testify, the TRC seeks to generate a collective and historical narrative that acknowledges the injustices of the past. As the

Commission's Final Report explains, this narrative strives to overcome the political and social impasses of the apartheid regime and points to the transformative potential of testimony to encourage collective healing:

> One of the main tasks of the Commission was to uncover as much as possible of the truth about past gross violations of human rights – a difficult and often very unpleasant task. The Commission was founded, however, in the belief that this task was necessary for the promotion of reconciliation and national unity. In other words, the telling of truth about past gross human rights violations, as viewed from different perspectives, facilitates the process of understanding our divided pasts, whilst the public acknowledgement of 'untold suffering and injustice' helps to restore the dignity of victims and afford perpetrators the opportunity to come to terms with their own past. (TRC, *Report* I:49)

According to the report, the validation that results from speaking and being heard promotes the victims' inclusion in a community from which they have been excluded, while the dissemination of their testimonies reinforces the hope of reconciliation. The report therefore suggests that the testimonies heard before the TRC are intended to have material effects – namely, that the narratives will transform not only the individual witnesses but also the society that listens to them. While the South African TRC was not the first commission of its sort, it differed from its most recent precursors, including the investigations of political crimes in Argentina and Chili, where witnesses did not openly testify. In South Africa, however, the TRC held public hearings in town halls and community centers across the country, and in an effort to make the process as accessible

as possible, the testimonies were interpreted into all eleven of the country's official languages and broadcast live on television and radio.[26]

Given the potential for transformative disclosure, the TRC is often discussed in terms of the psychological discourses of healing and repair. This model draws upon Freudian theories of trauma, according to which survivors repress a violence that later emerges in displaced and often uncontrollable ways.[27] To counter such destructive repression, the trauma must be articulated; as psychiatrist Judith Herman explains, "The survivor tells the story of the trauma. She tells it completely, in depth and detail. This work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor's life story" (175). By actively narrating one's experience in the presence of attentive witnesses, the survivor reforms parts of the self that have been damaged and fragmented. Since TRC is credited for articulating violent acts that had not been explicitly or publicly acknowledged, it is frequently described in similar terms. Rita Barnard, for instance, notes that the TRC was "founded with the express aim of excavating the secrets of an ugly past with a view to healing and national unity" (658). Barnard's language of "excavating" the past resonates with the notion that buried trauma must be acknowledged and verbalized in order to make sense of it. According to scholars

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[26] The TRC's effectiveness in uniting South African society has generated a large debate which lies beyond the scope of this chapter. For more, see Mahmood Mamdani, who asserts that the TRC overlooked the institutional effects of apartheid and overly narrowed the definition of victim. He argues that the TRC has followed a "trajectory that has de-emphasized justice in the interest of reconciliation and realism" ("Reconciliation without Justice." *South African Review of Books* 46 [1996]: 3-5). Also see Richard Wilson, who investigates the TRC's re-definition of justice as a need for understanding rather than vengeance, but Wilson concludes that the majority of South Africans continue to link the concept of justice with retribution (in *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa*).

[27] Freud outlines this process in his essay "Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*. Trans. John Reddick. London: Penguin, 2003).

of transitional justice, it is crucial that this excavation happen through a public process in which witnesses narrate their experiences before the state. For Ruti Teitel, the act of openly testifying to the atrocities of the past catalyzes individual as well as collective healing. Teitel argues that the accumulation of individual testimonies links a society's past with its future by creating a narrative of transition, as "tales of deceit and betrayal" move towards "the revelation that a newly gained knowledge and self-understanding affect and reconstitute identity and relationship" (113). The recognition of this transitional narrative then effects national healing; in Teitel's view, "Processes of historical inquiry bring forward and enable a public letting go of the evil history" (116). The act of testifying therefore encourages the formulation of an inclusive and collective record, one that seeks to acknowledge and come to terms with the past.

While such restorative narratives about the work of the TRC emphasize healing, truth-telling, and nation-building, other understandings of trauma and testimony complicate this ideal narrative trajectory. The effort of testifying to traumatic experiences often accentuates the difficulty of providing an account of the past, as trauma may not be fully recalled or may defy comprehension and expression. In her influential study on testimony, Shoshana Felman writes, "As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference" (5). For Felman, the testimony is not "a completed statement, a totalizable account of those events. In the testimony, language is in process and in trial, it does not possess itself as a conclusion, as the constation of a verdict or the self-transparency of

knowledge" (5). Rather than strictly presenting the facts of an experience, testimony has the potential to complicate and obscure – and indeed, testimony may call attention to the very difficulty of formulating and comprehending trauma in the first place. In such instances, the process of verbalizing trauma may not adhere to a linear progression of speaking and healing, but instead may be punctuated by silence and uncertainty. Even as testimony attempts to provide an account of the past, it also bestows a sense of the ungovernable and disorienting effects trauma has on efforts to represent it.

This is not to say that healing and social transformation do not take place through the process of testifying, but rather, that the act of giving testimony sometimes reveals how past experiences are not always available as constructs of knowledge, waiting to be actively articulated. In his consideration of the TRC, South African novelist André Brink points out that the process of healing through testimony is disrupted when memories of the past are fragmented and therefore not fully accessible. Brink maintains that "in the case of the TRC, there is the double bind that the kind of whole the exercise is aimed at can never be complete and that ultimately, like all narratives, this one must eventually be constructed around its own blind spots and silences" (37). A complete or comprehensive representation of the past may not always be achieved, which is why Brink calls for "an imagined rewriting of history or, more precisely, of the role of the imagination in the dialectic between past and present, individual and society" (37). In his view, narrative blind spots open up a space for imagination in the work of political reconstruction and in the acknowledgement of a traumatic history.

Krog evinces a similar perspective in *Country of my Skull*, in which she attempts to creatively approach the trauma of the past. She does not view the limitations of

language as a nonstarter, an obstacle that blocks a productive discussion of testifying to trauma, but instead, she sees these limitations as the condition of possibility for approaching traumatic experience. For Krog, the silent places of trauma invite exploration, allowing her to ask what this silence says about the way trauma is processed through language and literature. *Country of my Skull* investigates moments of silence and breakdown within the TRC in two crucial ways. First, Krog frames testimony as a structure of address between speaker and listener, though she explicitly focuses on moments where this address is interrupted. By drawing attention to what the testimonies leave unsaid, she points to both the inability to form a completed narrative of the past and reveals the indeterminate status of the truth. Second, *Country of my Skull* reveals how the testimonies Krog encounters in her role as a journalist traumatize her in turn, leading her to experience an intimate crisis of language and understanding. Krog's crisis leads her from the prose-oriented forms of journalism and memoir into the realm of poetry, a form that allows her to begin to imagine the pain to which she bears witness. Throughout the text, Krog suggests that unless the bewildering opacity of trauma is extended and intensified through the imagining of literature, there is no coming to terms with the effects of a traumatic past.

II

Country of my Skull provides a meditation on what it means to give testimony: on who is speaking, who is listening, and what can and cannot be related through the testimonial narrative. With its unorthodox blend of memoir, poetry, and journalism, *Country of my Skull* is a hybrid text in which no single aspect works simply to reflect a

"true" or "objective" representation of the TRC hearings. In an interview with Anthea Garman, Krog acknowledges that *Country of my Skull* is "not an 'accurate' book" (209). The text, according to Krog, was not meant to be "the stuff of journalism with its questions and details," but an effort to locate "the amazing otherness of where they [the witnesses] have been and how they've dealt with it" (Garman 208-209). From this assertion, Garman maintains that Krog's interest in the witnesses' various, complex experiences is what successfully allows for Krog's inclusion of literary elements within the text. As Garman says, "Krog's insistence that the truth resides not just in fact or in considered opinion, and that the way the truth is realised is via an actual encounter with the extremes of experience ('to get at the amazing otherness of where they have been'), was the kernel of the poetic commitment –and the discomforting contestation – she brought into hard-news journalism" (209). In *Country of my Skull*, the blend of poetic reflection, personal memoir, and journalistic interrogation results in a contemplative questioning of what it means to listen and respond to testimonies. Krog does not position any single genre as being able to fully represent witness testimonies as objects of knowledge, waiting to be interpreted. Instead, Krog asks what each discourse cannot represent when confronted with traumatic narratives.

The text's hybridity is further complicated in instances where Krog takes artistic liberties, fictionalizing certain aspects of her personal account as a reporter covering the TRC. One of the text's most striking inaccuracies is the adulterous affair Krog invents between herself and an imagined, unnamed lover. The fictional affair provides Krog with a framework for approaching the TRC hearings from multiple perspectives; within this framework, she can picture herself as a betrayer, imagine the hurt of one who has been

betrayed, and feel the frustration of a loved one seeking truth and vengeance. At one point in the text, Krog includes a fictional passage wherein she confesses the affair to her husband, who also remains unnamed. The imaginary conversation between Krog and her husband explores some of the underlying principles of the TRC itself, including confession and forgiveness. Krog's husband announces: "And you want amnesty from me, I must not hold it against you, I must forgive you, we must leave the past behind…well, two can play that game. So let's have a hearing. You can confess and I will call that man and he can say whether you are telling the truth" (262).[28] Krog's deliberately fictional space inside the space of memoir collapses any formal transition between genres, and this scene allows Krog, as a narrator, to introduce issues of truth and accountability through her own example. In particular, the imagined affair calls attention to the uncertain status of the truth, as her husband seeks to verify if what she says is true. The imagined affair, moreover, has raised questions regarding the truth value of the text itself. A passage in the South African edition explicitly reveals that the affair is fictionalized, as Krog admits that its invention gave her the opportunity to "verbalize certain personal reactions to the hearings" and "express the psychological underpinnings of the Commission" (South African edition, 171). This passage, however, is edited out of the U.S. version of the book, making it seem in this edition as though Krog's affair actually took place. The additional layer of confusion surrounding the factuality of the affair reinforces Krog's denial that the text represents an "accurate" or authoritative truth.

In exploring the blurred boundaries between truth and fiction within the text, several critics have debated its unusual combination of genres, especially questioning the

[28] All page references are for the U.S. edition of *Country of my Skull*, unless otherwise indicated.

place of literary elements, such fiction and memoir, alongside the more factual or journalistic accounts. For Meira Cook, *Country of My Skull* "treads an uneasy line between cultural witnessing and imaginative fictionalizing, thus begging the related question as to how this account should be read: as historical document or literary text" (75). This question of whether the text resides within the range of the historical or the literary serves as the source for much of the criticism leveled against it, particularly since Krog so frequently inserts actual testimonies given before the TRC into *Country of my Skull*. Laura Moss, for instance, registers the concern that the merging of the historical with the literary confuses "the truth of South African history" with "the narrator's truth" at the risk of undermining the gravity and significance of the victims' testimonies (88). Moss goes on to challenge Krog's use of anonymous testimony throughout *Country of my Skull*; at times, Krog provides the names of those who testify, but in other instances, she inserts testimonies into the text as unattributed quotations. The inclusion of anonymous testimonies leads Moss to claim that Krog sometimes omits important factual details that would add necessary social and historical context to the hearings, such as "the chronology or the location of the testimonies" (88). Fiona Ross imparts a similar criticism, noting that Krog's use of memoir threatens to "draw attention away from the suffering of those whose fragmented stories she represents in the book" (1998).

Each of these critics puts forth a rigorous and contentious response to *Country of my Skull*, raising the germane and compelling issue of how to write or speak of apartheid and its victims – especially within a text that does not claim to be historically accurate. My sense of the text, however, goes in another direction: while *Country of my Skull* does not serve as a strict representation of what is true, I maintain that Krog's blend of genres

and her inclusion of fictionalized passages allows her to generate new forms of self-expression, directing new discovery and interpretation. The text often leaves open gaps in knowledge or information, such as when Krog omits the contexts and identifying details the some of the testimonies. Shane Graham views these omissions as a way of denying "an easy closure" to her audience, leading her readers away from the "artificial mourning" that stems from assuming they are now capable of fully knowing or understanding the victims' experiences (57). By withholding a firm sense of resolution, *Country of my Skull* posits the dynamics of testimony, of speaking and listening, as an ongoing process that extends beyond the text itself. Other scholars argue that Krog's reliance on memoir allows her to engage with the TRC in a way she could not do through journalistic accounts alone. Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith assert that *Country of my Skull* productively examines the inequalities of the apartheid regime precisely because of Krog's emotional engagement with the events she describes, arguing that "Krog becomes a witness in the second person, staging acts of complicity, guilt, loss, suffering, and apology" (1579). From this point of view, the text acknowledges the very real struggles of coming to terms with South Africa's internecine past through its creative employment of literary techniques.

I would add, moreover, that reading *Country of my Skull* as either historical account or literary representation seems to evade one issue the text implicitly raises: that such labeling is contingent, determined by the narrative constructions that come to shape such distinctions. By drawing from multiple generic lenses, Krog disrupts the certainties that are attached to the processes of knowing how to read or interpret any single genre. To position Krog as journalist, memoirist, or poet, to approach her text as historical or

literary, assumes that we already know how to read her story and situate it within the reassuring parameters of a history already known. Instead, the text does not always reassure us, but invites us to consider the possibility that we do not quite know how to read the events it discusses. In some ways, the text reflects a dilemma within the TRC itself, as scholars have debated whether or not the Commission can fit into any one social or political framework. As Paul Gready says, the TRC generates "genre confusion" precisely because it is "an imperfectly realized hybrid genre, spanning the state inquiry, human rights report, and official history" (20). The layered use of genre, as Krog deploys it in *Country of my Skull*, enables her to compose a text that is self-reflexive and open-ended, one that asks us to question our interpretative practices when it comes to examining the restorative force of testimony as well as constructions of the truth.

The inclusion of multiple testimonies in *Country of my Skull* results in a dialogic and collaborative narrative that reflects on the act of bearing witness. Krog frames testimony as an address to another, a dynamic process that depends on both speaker and listener. If *Country of my Skull* sometimes shifts away from a mimetic commitment to a quest for truth, the text shows Krog's engagement with Felman's conception of bearing witness, which is more than "to simply report a fact or an event or to relate what has been lived, recorded, and remembered. Memory is conjured here essentially in order to *address* another, to impress upon a listener, to *appeal* to a community" (204, italics original). *Country of my Skull* contains transcriptions of various testimonies, and the inclusion of these testimonies allows Krog to explore the nature of the testimonial address and the interconnected roles of witness and listener. One section of the text, which includes several fragments of anonymous victim testimony, provides a particularly

striking example of testimony as a form of address. Spanning over four pages, these accounts comprise the list of unattributed testimonies that have led critics to express the concern that the victims' voices are overshadowed. While I will shortly discuss Krog's decision to include anonymous testimonies, I would now like to emphasize that this passage contributes to a wider discussion of the dialogic structure of testimony. This section of *Country of my Skull* considers one of the central theories behind the TRC, which is that the act of publicly testifying leads to both individual and collective recovery. Krog expresses interest in examining the restorative effects of verbalizing a traumatic experience, but she does not assume that this process will inherently or inevitably succeed. Specifically, Krog investigates moments in which the testimonial narrative collapses; in other words, she asks what happens when the address from speaker to listener is interrupted or goes unheard, or when the full story of the past is lost and cannot be disclosed.

Before the text approaches these questions, Krog contemplates the potential for testimony to transform and heal. A brief but significant lyrical passage immediately precedes the litany of testimonies, a passage that expresses the necessity of testifying to loss:

> Beloved, do not die. Do not dare die! I, the survivor, I wrap you in words so that the future inherits you. I snatch you from the death of forgetfulness. I tell your story, complete your ending – you who once whispered beside me in the dark. (38)

The "I" of this passage is distinct from Krog's autobiographical voice, representing instead the many survivors who appear before the Commission, testifying to the deaths of

those they lost. Krog inserts this voice into the text in order to imaginatively explore the motivations behind testifying before the TRC, explicitly conveying the capacity of testimony to remember and repair. If one of the premises behind the Commission suggests that individual narratives contribute to a collective effort of recovery, this notion is expressed here through the testimonial voice that strives to "complete" the stories of the dead. The voice of "I, the survivor" speaks to a nameless "Beloved", who stands in for those who were killed during apartheid. As Mark Sanders observes, Krog draws attention to the notion that "testimony depends on an address to an other; to the figure of a beloved, for whom one's story will cohere; to a proxy for the perpetrator, who will absorb violence in his or her place; but also in the form of apostrophic imprecation" (163).[29] The effort to verbalize grief provides access to the Beloved in the form of an apostrophic address, which allows for not only an encounter with the other but also serves as an injunction to the other: "Do not dare die!" Such a compelling demand evokes the conviction that death may be symbolically forestalled through acts of remembrance.

Some of the testimonies in this section of the text bear out this conviction; in one, a parent who testifies to the death of his son ends his narrative with a specific address to his child: "Sonnyboy, rest well, my child. I've translated you from the dead" (40). These words resonate with the notion that testimony is capable of recovering and passing on on the memory of apartheid victims. Through the act of telling, the narrator of this testimony

[29] Sanders discusses "the figure of the beloved" specifically in terms of Krog's invented affair, arguing that her creation of a lover serves as an allegory for the TRC's question and answer sessions. He maintains that Krog creates the proxy figure of the beloved in the absence of her family, inventing a listener to hear her personal testimony as she reports on the TRC. For Sanders, this projected possibility of an interlocutor is inherent in all communication and serves as the crux for his argument that narrative – whether it be testimonial or literary – is a collaborative process. His assertion that the presence of an addressee is necessary for testimony is also relevant for the section of *Country of my Skull* that I discuss here.

makes his child's story accessible to the realm of the living, staving off "the death of forgetfulness". The voice of "I, the survivor" further indicates that testimony is given not only for the sake of those who have been lost, but also for those who listen to the testimony. This voice reassures the Beloved, "I wrap you in words so that the future inherits you", suggesting that the story of the Beloved – now told by the survivor – will be enfolded in language and projected into the future. By delivering these stories before the presence of the TRC, the survivor seeks to establish a verbal legacy, passing on the narratives of the past so they will not be forgotten.

The narrative of "I, the survivor" thus conveys the transformative potential of testimony, but Krog does not view the possibility of remembrance as ubiquitous or guaranteed. Even the forceful phrasing of "Do not dare die!" already carries within it the threat and inevitability of death. Uttering the phrase acknowledges the very real and immediate risk of dying; these words would not need to be stated if the survivor was not in danger of losing a loved one. Indeed, by the time the phrase is said, the Beloved has already died, so that these words tacitly acknowledge the disappearance of the one who no longer "whisper[s]" to the survivor "in the dark". The testimony of "I, the survivor" consequently accentuates the very absence of the victims, who cannot tell their own stories. Instead, this task must be completed for them, and the recognition that the victims cannot testify for themselves is itself a kind of testimony to the inescapability of death. While testimony attempts to retain the memory of those who died, it must also proclaim their very absence. Even as the voice of "I, the survivor" strives to complete the stories of the dead, Krog includes some testimonies in the text that challenge the ability of language to fully evoke this suggested immortality. In one testimony, the survivor struggles to

explain what happened to her loved one: "This inside me…fights my tongue. It is…unshareable. It destroys…words. Before he was blown up, they cut off his hands so he could not be fingerprinted…So how do I say this? –this terrible…I want his hands back" (39, ellipses original). In juxtaposition with the lyrical voice of "I, the survivor", this testimony indicates the difficulty of articulating grief, as the survivor's suffering is overpowering to the point that it "destroys" her words. In this moment of witnessing, language cannot fully represent or adequately testify, conveying pain rather than closure. The survivor's testimony, furthermore, points to what remains incomplete from the story: she cannot fully enunciate what happened to her loved one, and the focus on his missing hands serves as a reminder that closure may not pervasively occur as a completed narrative or process. The text thus reveals discomfort in the effort to speak, as the desire to testify on behalf of another confronts the difficulty of finding words for experience.

In testimonies such as this one, the address to the figure of the Beloved recedes before the inability to speak, raising the question of what happens when speech is not possible or when the address is disrupted or ignored. Implicit within any address is the problem of the address being misunderstood or perhaps not heard at all. The threat that communication will be interrupted resides in all exchanges, as Derrida reminds us in *The Post Card*, wherein he offers the example of the postal system to show that it is always possible for a message to go astray. As Derrida explains, "Not that the letter never arrives at its destination, but it belongs to the structure of the letter to be capable, always, of not arriving" (444). In other words, an address to another risks being misaddressed, lost, or ignored, resulting in no exchange at all. Because of the persistent possibility that the letter will not arrive, Derrida continues, "one can say that it never truly arrives, that when it

does arrive its capacity not to arrive torments it with an internal drifting" (489). It is important to note that this formulation does not necessarily imply that all communication is condemned to fail, but instead, it suggests that the structures which determine the completion of the message's delivery (i.e., the postal system) are also the very structures which constitute its possible incompletion. As a result, the message's arrival is perpetually unsettled by the notion that it will never arrive.

The problem of a failed address is not only one that emerges from some of the testimonies in *Country of My Skull*, but also one that Krog encounters as an author. Initially, the text did not contain any anonymous narratives, and the names of the witnesses were typed before each testimony in bold font. In an interview with her editor, Ivan Vladislavić, Krog reveals the anxiety she felt to "make the testimonies of the victims and perpetrators readable on paper" ("The Cook" 93). However, readers who were asked to write short descriptions for the book's cover confessed to "skipping" the testimonies because the were "too hard to read". Although *Country of my Skull* attempts to convey the rawness of traumatic experience and its psychological impact through the inclusion of victim testimonies, this experience was in effect not being transmitted. Krog then became charged with the task of making the unreadable readable, an undertaking that also implicitly acknowledges the lingering potential for testimony *not* to be heard or read, despite its insistence on an addressee. Although the address of testimony contains within it the possibility of failure, Krog indicates that one of her tasks as a writer is to counter this failure and continue the conversation. Together, she and Vladislavić revised the presentation of the testimonies, and as Krog recounts, "I decided to remove everything that would make it visually easy to 'skip' the testimony – the bold names, the different

font, and Ivan carefully punctuated the testimonies…Many people were specifically moved by the testimonies in the book, indicating to me that they were indeed read" (94). Somewhat paradoxically, Krog succeeds in drawing her readers to the testimonies by making them appear less noticeable on the printed page. Her admission places significant emphasis on the processes at work in constructing a text, foregrounding the artistry and arrangement inherent in telling any story. By including a wide range of testimonies – both those that find relief in speaking and those that do not – and by acknowledging her own difficulties in sharing the testimonies with her readers, Krog calls attention to silences and blind spots, to moments where address breaks down, within testimonial and literary narratives.

Through its inclusion of witness testimony, *Country of my Skull* recognizes the desire to testify as integral to the process of healing, but at the same time, the text often foregrounds instances when this desire is subverted. Krog, however, does not reveal the breakdowns in testimonial narratives in order to undermine or challenge the importance of bearing witness. For her, these moments of interruption serve as an entry point into exploring the effects of traumatic experience on attempts to speak of the past. She indicates that testimonial narratives are not necessarily suppressed by interruptive moments, but instead take shape from these moments, arising out of the very struggle to testify. In consideration of this concern, Krog and her friend, Professor Kondlo, listen to a tape recording Krog made of the hearing of Nomonde Calata, in which Nomonde recounts the death of her husband, the activist Fort Calata. In contradistinction to the anonymous testimonies, Krog identifies Nomonde by name and contextualizes the

hearing by describing the circumstances of her husband's disappearance.[30] Nomonde's testimony includes a store of detailed information as she recounts Fort's anti-apartheid activities, very clearly recalling the day he went missing (Friday, 27 June 1985) and her subsequent concern for him: "At eleven I was anxious. . . I was unable to sleep because my husband was not yet back as he had promised" (55, ellipsis original). For Krog, however, the precision of Nomonde's account is diverted when she begins to cry in the middle of her testimony, causing the Commission to call for a recess. At the moment when Nomonde cries out, Krog and Kondlo pause the tape, and Krog remarks, "For me, this crying is the beginning of the Truth Commission—the signature tune, the definite moment, the ultimate sound of what the process is about…She was wearing this vivid orange-red dress, and she threw herself backward and that sound … that sound…it will haunt me forever and ever" (57, ellipses original). In Krog's view, this cry carries more force than Nomonde's spoken testimony, so that the TRC begins not with words, but with the disconcertingly raw and nonverbal "tune" of Nomonde's cry. The eruption of her cry draws the hearing to a halt, suspending language and functioning as a nonlinguistic expression in which sonorous intensity overflows any statement. As such, the Commission is inaugurated through its very disruption, as though it cannot truly commence until it confronts the limitations of spoken language to testify to grief. Nomonde's narrative is one of the most contextualized in *Country of My Skull*, and yet for Krog, the testimony's significance does not lie in the information it relates, but in the interruption of Nomonde's ability to convey such details. The testimony accordingly

[30] The U.S. edition of *Country of my Skull* also contains a Glossary and Cast of Characters, which explains Fort Calata's involvement in the anti-apartheid United Democratic Front. The text also outlines the murder of Fort and his three colleagues, which took place as they traveled from the town of Port Elizabeth to Cradock. They subsequently became known as the Cradock Four.

becomes a space where traumatic memory and pain overtake any form of knowledge that arises through contextualization or factual descriptions, and in this instance, it is not language but the sound and image of a cry that become the focal point of the narrative. In moments where language gives way, the question that arises is not so much how individual trauma may be verbalized and transformed before a public forum as it is how listeners of testimony may make sense of the cries, the interruptions, and the silences.

Confronted with the striking sound of Nomonde's cry, Krog goes on to suggest that the interruptive cry itself is what makes testimony possible. Krog's friend Professor Kondlo asserts:

> The academics say pain destroys language and this brings about an immediate reversion to a prelinguistic state – and to witness that cry was to witness the destruction of language…was to realize that to remember the past of this country is to be thrown back into a time before language. And to get that memory, to fix it in words, to capture it with the precise image, is to be present at the birth of language itself. But more practically, this particular memory at last captured in words can no longer haunt you, push you around, bewilder you, because you have taken control of it—you can move it wherever you want. So maybe that is what the commission is all about—finding words for that cry of Nomonde Calata. (57, ellipsis original)

In Nomonde's testimony, crying emerges as the sound of a history which overwhelms, pointing to the irrepressible yet untold past. While language, as a system of communication, is intended to inscribe and relay the past, Kondlo identifies an expression within the cry that eludes verbalization, one that has not yet been inscribed. The cry, then,

comes to function as both a remainder and a reminder of a past that has gone unvoiced; as Kondlo notes above, this past resides in "a time before language". Nevertheless, the cry does not sink into silence but calls for words to describe it. The Commission is charged with "finding words for that cry", a process that allows for the past to emerge through testimonial invention. However, locating words for the cry does not approach language as a transparent or neutral tool that may be used to harness experience, but recognizes the struggle that comes with articulating traumatic experience. As the desire to confront the past encounters the inadequacy of language, the injunction to find words takes as its departure the inaccessibility of trauma itself.

Krog and Kondlo's conversation also stresses their role as listeners of Nomonde's testimony, positioning them as witnesses to her efforts to speak. The importance of articulating trauma does not appear as a finalized process—the words for the cry of Nomonde Calata are not found by either Krog or Kondlo—but is instead presented as an ongoing task, in which both victim and listener participate. As Kondlo notes, the endeavor to articulate the very experience that defies language leads to a sense of control over that experience, so that "this particular memory at last captured in words can no longer haunt you, push you around, bewilder you." This process affects both victim and listener: as the victim begins to gain access to her experience, those who hear her testimony behold the creation of a previously unspoken narrative. As Kondlo puts it, to hear Nomonde's cry is "to be present at the birth of language itself." He and Krog therefore bear witness to the process by which the trauma moves from an inassimilable experience to one that may begin to be shaped in narrative terms, and their role as listeners assists in transforming the expression behind the prelinguistic cry into one that

may be accessed. According to psychiatrist Dori Laub, regardless of how well-documented the history of a traumatic event may be, the presence of an attentive listener is necessary to transform the "overwhelming shock" of trauma into an experience that may be "truly witnessed" (57). As Laub says:

> The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to – and heard – is, therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the 'knowing' of the event is given birth to. The listener, therefore, is a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*. The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time. (57)

The knowledge that arises from the act of giving testimony is not factual or historical per se, but comes instead from the act of observing and listening to what happened – an act of witnessing in its own right. In the text's description of Nomonde Calata's hearing, Krog and Kondlo become witnesses to the struggle to find words for experience. That is to say, they become witnesses to the very generation of testimony itself. When Krog listens and reflects on the victims' testimonies given at the TRC, *Country of my Skull* reveals that the effort to bear witness to the past is not always hindered or prevented by disruptive or interruptive moments, but when these moments occur, they are in themselves an undeniable testimony to the magnitude of apartheid.

Listening to Nomonde's hearing, Krog and Kondlo witness the generation of a narrative that is not solely engaged with the ability to know or contextualize. In *Country of my Skull*, discerning knowledge is not always about locating evidence or disclosing some elusive truth, as Krog makes apparent when she considers the TRC's amnesty

hearings. If Krog identifies the "starting point" of the victims' hearings as "the indefinable wail that burst from Nomonde Calata's lips", she connects this moment of nonverbal, agitated response to the beginning of the amnesty hearings, explaining:

> The starting point of the perpetrators' narrative is the uncontrollable muscle in Brian Mitchell's jaw. Mitchell is seeking amnesty for his part in the Truth Feed massacre, in which eleven people died. When Judge Andrew Wilson asks him during his amnesty hearing: "Would you say you suffered a lot?" the only answer Mitchell can muster is a frantically quivering jaw muscle. (75)

Once again, Krog's portrayal of testimony mediates between the spoken and the unspoken, as the answers to some questions cannot be adequately phrased. In her discussion of the amnesty hearings, Krog notices the ways in which silences and omissions shape the testimonies heard before the TRC. *Country of my Skull* posits the amnesty hearings as a space of indecision in regards to what can be definitively labeled as the truth, but this does not mean that the text negates the importance of the hearings or their focus on revealing past atrocities. Instead, Krog's consideration of the hearings opens up her notion of the truth, shifting away from absolute definitions to one in which many perspectives come to structure narratives of the past and the way they are perceived during the TRC.

Krog discerns a conflict embedded within the condition of amnesty itself: while the TRC stipulates that amnesty will be granted to applicants who truthfully confess their crimes, official pardon is given only for politically motivated crimes, a proviso that, according to Krog, led some applicants to purposefully conceal offenses that were not

considered political in nature. [31] This dilemma becomes particularly evident when Krog reports on the hearing that investigates the murders of policeman Richard Mutase and his wife Irene by officers of the security force. In their testimonies, the officers admit to entering the Mutases' home, locking Irene in a bedroom, and then shooting Richard. Before leaving, one of them killed Irene as well, but they left the couple's six-year-old son Tshidiso alive. What strikes Krog about this particular hearing are the variations between two of the security officer's testimonies. While the murder of Richard Mutase meets the conditions for amnesty, Irene's does not, and as such, neither of the officers are willing to admit to killing her but place the blame on one another instead. Considering the officers' denials, Krog says, "So there are actually two stories: the story and the understory, the matrix, the propelling force determining what is left out, what is used, how it is used. And at the heart of this force are the amnesty conditions" (107). Part of Krog's role as a listener is to track the various social and political currents that run beneath the testimonies, shaping them and motivating them, and this undertaking reveals that such narrative framing is not impartial or disinterested. Hearing these testimonies also means listening for the "understory", for what is not and will not be said. This understory contains the difficult and even uncomfortable truth that falsehoods comprise some of the narratives upon which the TRC is based. Silences and denials come to drive

[31] Amnesty is one of the most highly debated aspects of the TRC. Overall, Krog speaks positively of the Commission, but in *The Provocations of Amnesty*, she evinces concern that the amnesty hearings over-judicialized the TRC, which was not meant to handle criminal persecutions. William Kentridge, director of Jane Taylor's highly acclaimed play *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, condemns the "central irony" amnesty process: "As people give more and more evidence of the things they have done they get closer and closer to amnesty and it gets more and more intolerable that these people should be given amnesty" (*Ubu* viii). In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur writes more generally of amnesty as a form of "institutional forgetting" that could dangerously result in an amnesia of the past (453).

the direction the testimony will take as much as what is spoken, and in this hearing, the truth of who killed Irene Mutase remains withheld. The officers' conflicting stories illustrate a lacuna in the very depths of the testimonial act, one that revolves around the loss of certainty and the awareness that the truth will remain unsaid. In this case, it is the testimonies themselves that call attention to the absence of, and even the resistance to, the full disclosure of the truth.

Krog further emphasizes the counterfactual aspects of the security officers' testimonies by aligning them with a third, fictionalized account of the Mutase murders. She analyzes the murders not only in terms of the subtext of each of the officers' versions of events, but as she listens to the tape recording of their testimonies, she also pulls "from [her] bag an Afrikaans novel that contains a fictionalized account of the Mutase murders", John Miles's *Kroniek uit die Doofpot* (*Chronicle of a Cover-Up*), and begins to read (105).[32] By considering the officers' statements in conjunction with the novel, Krog suggests that their testimonies have no more or less authority than the fictionalized representation; if anything, placing the officers' accounts in relation to the novel highlights the fictionality within their very testimonies. Within these conflicting testimonies, there is a multiplicity of truths – as well as a multiplicity of lies – that come to shape the official record of the TRC. As Krog says, the amnesty applicants' stories "became part of a whole circuit of narratives" that include "literature, Truth Commission testimonies, newspaper reports" (107). No single account is fully capable of explaining

[32] Miles's novel is based on documentation that was given to him by Richard Mutase's lawyer following the murders.

the Mutase murders; instead, Krog considers the crime through the interplay of a series of narratives, all of which have some bearing on how the murders are perceived.

Despite the many narratives that come to shape the Mutase hearings, an important omission remains, one that cannot be filled in by any of the accounts that describe the crime. Returning to the troubling question of who murdered Irene Mutase, Krog writes:

> Either Hechter or Mamsela killed Irene Mutase. The truth does not lie in between. There cannot be a compromise between the two versions.
>
> Is the truth known only to the dead?
>
> Between the bodies, the child Tshidiso remains. Which truth does he inherit? It is for him that the truth must be found. (112)

Krog is left facing the crucial but unsolvable mystery surrounding the murder of Irene Mutase. Here there is no common ground, no "compromise" that may lead to a cohesive narrative, but only two contested testimonies. The coexistence of multiple perspectives hardly provides a sense of complete or conclusive knowledge; rather, the simultaneous presence of these perspectives underscores the impossibility of wholeness. Confronted with ambiguity, Krog's textual reading gives way to an irresolvable line of questioning: "Is the truth known only to the dead?" and "Which truth does he [the child Tshidiso] inherit?" The question of inheritance recalls the previously mentioned lyrical voice which prefaces the text's earlier representation of victim testimonies, the voice that proclaims: "I, the survivor, I wrap you in words so that the future inherits you. I snatch you from the death of forgetfulness. I tell your story, complete your ending – you who once whispered beside me in the dark". This voice describes the transformative potential of testimony to generate a legacy of the past, but in the Mutase hearings, the story of Irene's murder

remains conspicuously incomplete, breaking the chain of memorial inheritance that the Mutase's son Tshidiso, who as a child embodies South Africa's future, should receive. Rather than offer resolution, these testimonies trouble the restorative progression put forth by the discourse of truth-telling. Krog's inability to reconcile the differing accounts reveals the fragile foundation upon which such stories are built, as the epistemological underpinnings of the truth give way to indeterminacy. When Krog cannot know the answer, she suggests that knowing is not actually the answer; at the heart of the pretense to know the truth may only be silence and uncertainty.

Krog's discussion of the Mutase murders acknowledges the existence of competing or contesting narratives that may not exhaustively be true. In passages such as this, the text comes up against the limitations of testimony to reveal a recoverable or integrated narrative of the past.

For Krog, the notion of the truth is continually in process. When she reports on the TRC, she exists in an uneasy relationship to the idea of the truth, a relationship that complicates rather than clarifies the process of identifying any authoritative claims to what is considered true. In the following passage, Krog struggles to even utter the word "truth" when she constructs news bulletins on the TRC:

> The word "truth" makes me uncomfortable.
>
> The word "truth" still trips the tongue.
>
> "Your voice tightens up when you approach the word 'truth'," the technical assistant says, irritated. "Repeat it twenty times so that you become familiar with it. *Truth is mos jou job!"* ("Truth is your job, after all!")

> I hesitate at the word; I am not used to using it. Even when I type it, it ends up as either *turth* or *trth*. I have never bedded that word in a poem. I prefer the word "lie." The moment the lie raises its head, I smell blood. Because it is here… where the truth is closest. (50)

Truth, exact representation, and precision – arguably the aims of journalism, which comprise Krog's "job, after all" – do not offer her clarification, but instead confound her sense of authority. In this moment, the notion of the truth explicitly undermines her control of language; she cannot physically enunciate the word "truth", and her fingers refuse to type it. This physical awkwardness draws attention to the notion of truth as a progressive construction rather than as instinctive or inherent. For Krog to even utter the word "truth", she must "repeat it twenty times", training herself to articulate that which feels unnatural. Although I will return to Krog's reflections on poetry later on, I will point out here that it is within this unease that her role as a reporter anxiously encounters her identity as a poet. She notes that the word "truth" has no place in her poetry, a domain that instead embraces the freedom that comes with not being bound to what is real, one that even celebrates the lie. Whereas truth cannot be consummately or conclusively "bedded" in a poem, or made material by actually typing out the word, Krog characterizes the lie as something easier to detect; she can even scent the lie as though it were blood. Neither creative invention nor the lie carries the anxiety of correctly or accurately representing the truth, which is not, at any rate, always fully discernable. In this respect, a lie – or perhaps poetic invention – offers certain freedoms to Krog, freedoms which beget reflection when the truth itself cannot be known. As Krog points out, however, the lie does not preclude or oppose any sort of truth, but it is in the lie

"where the truth is closest". This statement recalls another of Krog's writings, where she asserts that part of her role as a reporter was not to delineate a single truth, but to be aware "of the existence of many truths. Some of those truths one might not like, some might simply be lies, but even the construction of that lie articulated a particular truth" (*Conditional Tense* 18).

Krog's assertion that the lie is "where the truth is closest" resonates with her decision to fictionalize some passages in *Country of my Skull* –such as her invented affair – in order to convey the subterranean psychological and social currents that influence the TRC. Moments of invention allow Krog to convey truths that are not explicitly revealed through a factual account of the TRC; in other words, Krog connects more deeply to the TRC through her literary imagination. In another section of the text, Krog fictionalizes the details of a workshop held specifically for journalists reporting on the TRC. Following her account of the workshop, she inserts a meta-narrative passage into the text, in which one of her colleagues reads a draft of her depiction. When he sees that "this is not quite happened at the workshop", he throws an accusation at Krog: "You're not busy with the truth!" (225). Krog replies:

> I am busy the truth…*my* truth. Of course, it's quilted together from hundreds of stories that we've experienced or heard about in the past two years. Seen from my perspective, shaped by my state of mind at the time and now also by the audience I'm telling the story to. In every story, there is hearsay, there is a grouping together of things that didn't necessarily happen together, there are assumptions, there are exaggerations to bring home the enormities of situations, there is

> downplaying to confirm innocent. And all this together makes up the whole country's truth. So also the lies. And the stories that date from earlier times. (225)

For Krog, any notion of the truth represents more than a veridical account of the past, encompassing instead several shifting, multivalent narratives. The coexistence of multiple stories opens up the definition and scope of what may be called the "truth", moving away from absolute interpretations to a broader collection of stories. As her discussion of Irene Mutase's murder shows, Krog does not deny that lies may be harmful, but she nevertheless views falsehoods as an unavoidable part of the TRC that cannot be denied. Deborah Posel argues that conflicting narratives of the past are not necessarily irreconcilable with the aims of the TRC, which could not realistically rely on a single definition of the truth. In Posel's words, "Truth can no longer be formulated as merely a comprehensive, unified assemblage of objective facts; it has become impossible not to acknowledge a multiplicity of perspectives – as personal truths – which coexist with the official, impersonal, and authoritative truth produced by the commission's rigorous investigations" (127).[33] The coexistence of these multiple forms of individual and official narratives opens up the definition and scope of what may be called the "truth", shifting away from absolute definitions to a broader collection of narratives. In the absence of complete knowledge of the past – that is, in the world of contingent human motivations as opposed to certain *a priori* truths – Krog does not attempt to stifle falsehoods or

[33] It is worth noting that the TRC's architects did not claim to discover any sort of absolute or ultimate truth. The TRC's final report poses the question, "What about truth – and whose truth?" Because the Commission was mandated to investigate contested narratives and promote reconciliation among adversaries, it negotiated the demands of multiple groups. As such, the Commission did not consider its findings to represent a final account of the past. The TRC's Chairman, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, referred to the report as "a perspective on the truth about the past…It is not and cannot be the whole story" (*Report* 1.5).

contesting perspectives. While testimony may allow for the productive transformation of suffering, the act of speaking to the past does not always assimilate disparate points of view. Krog remains attentive to these viewpoints, which come into play as she confronts the complexities and indeterminacies that frame her encounters with the past.

III

In addition to exposing the difficulties of testifying to trauma and the instable status of the truth, *Country of my Skull* details how the witness statements come to impact Krog, traumatizing her with their revelations of suffering and breaking down her sense of journalistic objectivity. As a reporter, Krog participates in the widespread dissemination of testimonies, constructing news bulletins for SABC radio. In her book *Conditional Tense*, Krog explains that she and her colleagues "would provide the time and place for each case as well as 20-second sound bites from the most poignant and devastating testimonies, carefully selected and introduced in a way which made their presence on the news vital instead of sensational or overdramatic" (17). Since direct testimony was embedded within each news bulletin, the witnesses' voices were nationally broadcast, allowing for many of their stories to be publicly acknowledged for the first time. Krog asserts that the transmission of victim testimony "changed the sound of the news: a housecleaner was heard on the same news bulletin as President Mandela; a Tshivenda mother-tongue speaker shared the air with Bill Clinton" (16). Since the witnesses' narratives were translated into all eleven of South Africa's official languages, the radio reports were also capable of transmitting the testimonies to diverse communities throughout the country. Commissioner Alex Boraine credits the radio reports with

generating public awareness of the proceedings, explaining, "Unlike many commissions, this one was centre stage, and media coverage, particularly radio, enabled the poor, the illiterate, and people living in rural areas to participate in its works so that it was truly a national experience rather than restricted to a small handful of selected commissioners" (89).

If, for Krog, one of the most significant aspects of the TRC are the stories that emerge, then she and her colleagues take on the important role of widely circulating these stories. At the same time, Krog self-reflexively interrogates her role as a broadcast journalist in *Country of my Skull*. In the text, she acknowledges the extent to which the testimonies are structured and transformed as they are shaped into sound bites, a process that, according to Krog, involves imposing a narrative structure on them. She describes the construction of one of the first news bulletins as follows:

> Stories, complete stories with beginnings, middles and ends, are told for the first time: in a forty-second report, we relate how Phindile Mfeti told his wife that he was going to have his jeans shortened, then disappeared without a trace. How she later found on his desk the glasses and pipe that he always took with him. How she asked the commission for something to bury – even if it was just a piece of bone or a handful of ash. (44)

The news bulletin gives the appearance of a narrative arc, providing listeners with a "complete" sense of the testimony in a brief span of time. And yet, as Krog's depictions of various testimonies have shown, the stories that are given at the hearings are not always "complete" or final. Nor are these testimonies necessarily "told for the first time", as they are during the hearings themselves, but instead, the stories are being retold

through the broadcast after being transcribed, spliced, and edited. This moment draws attention to the mediation of context and language that are involved in shaping and disseminating the testimonies. Moreover, Krog evinces a concern that the very sound bites that are intended to convey the witnesses' voices across the country run the risk of exploiting their testimonies. She admits that her radio team comes to define "a perfect sound bite" as including "fantastic testimony", a "sexy subject", and "nice audible crying" (45). While Krog's news bulletins perform the unprecedented function of broadcasting narratives that had never before been publicly heard, their brevity also threatens to compress the testimonies into exploitative extracts.

As such, *Country of my Skull* does not attempt to be a journalistic account of the TRC but instead critically examines the processes typically associated with "objective" reporting. Krog's concern with exploitation, along with her discussion of reshaping the testimonies into bulletins, serves to dissect the underlying ideology of journalism and its assumed norms and routines. In his discussion of the development of journalistic practices, Jean Chalaby notes that "agents in the journalistic field developed their own *discursive norms and values*, such as objectivity and neutrality" (304, italics original). Remarking on Chalaby's study, Erik Neveu declares that "one can speak seriously of journalism as a profession and a field only when it defines its own patterns of writing and deciphering the world as different from those of politics and literature, and when journalists have their own skills, myths and values" (338). In this view, journalism has come to be seen as an autonomous branch of writing that situates its legitimacy in its separation from more subjective or supposedly biased fields, such as literature and politics. In *Country of my Skull*, however, Krog debunks the "myths" that have come to

inform journalism, especially when she is unable to remain detached from the testimonies on which she reports or when she questions the nature of the truths that come before the TRC. Instead of sustaining the "illusion", as Neveu says, that Krog is a separate and independent agent reporting on the TRC objectively, she does not restrict her responses to or involvement in the events she chronicles (340).

In dismantling her position as a reporter, Krog foregrounds the myriad complexities and difficulties bound up with listening to traumatic testimonies. She particularly confronts the dilemma of maintaining an objective distance from the testimonies on which she reports, and her closeness to the hearings results in the onset of her nervous breakdown. After weeks of listening to and transcribing the testimonies, she develops her own mental and physical symptoms of trauma:

> I wake up in unfamiliar beds with blood on my flayed lips…and sound bites screaming in my ears.
>
> I receive a call. "They say the story is really powerful…Can we possibly send another sound bite? Shall we send the one about the fillings or the one about the daughter coming toward them?"
>
> I wipe my face. "Send the one about how he just sits – and remember to add that the newspapers of the day said pieces of his son's hair and eyes were found in a tree near the bakkie."
>
> My hair is falling out. My teeth are falling out. I have rashes. After the amnesty deadline, I enter my house like a stranger. And barren. I sit around for days. Staring. (65, ellipses original)

In many respects, Krog's description of her physical symptoms mirror the very testimonies to which she listens. The testimony Krog mentions above – "the one about he just sits" – reveals this emulation: "I and my son buried our two family members and the next day our two friends. Since then it has been down the hill for me all the way. I sit for days…I simply sit…I lost my business" (65, ellipses original). Krog experiences similar effects of paralysis; overwhelmed by feelings of powerlessness, she is rendered immobile and can do no more than "sit around for days". The separation between witness and journalist begins to dissolve: the witnesses, far from simply being "subjects" on which Krog reports, transform her through the traumatic resonance of their narratives.

Krog's mental and physical collapse illustrates the ways in which traumatic stories are transmitted from witness to listener. In his study of testimony, Dori Laub points out that the listener "comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event", eventually feeling "the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread, and conflicts that the trauma victim feels" (57, 58). As a listener, Krog partakes of the traumatic experiences to which she is exposed, losing her sense of agency and self-control. Laub goes on to say that the listener ideally realizes that he "is also a separate human being" who "preserves his own separate place, position, and perspective", but Krog finds herself unable to maintain this distance. In the passage above, Krog cannot escape from the sound bites she constructs, which relentlessly return as nightmares "screaming in [her] ears". She also experiences a series of repositionings and displacements: she describes "wak[ing] up in unfamiliar beds" while reporting on the TRC, only to "enter [her] house like a stranger" when she finally returns home. As her sense of self recedes before the traumatic testimonies she hears, she experiences the uncanny sensation of no longer quite

belonging in her own home. Altered as she is, she is not who she was when she left, but reenters as someone shattered by traumatic testimony.

Like many of the victims who testify before the TRC, Krog struggles to find the words to frame her experience. This struggle reveals itself most acutely when Krog attempts to reassert her role as a journalist, a role that is rooted in her ability to discuss the TRC with clear and concise language. It is exactly her endeavors as a reporter, however, that strip away her capacity to speak. Because of her daily exposure to traumatic narratives, she realizes that "reporting on the Truth Commission" leaves her "physically exhausted and mentally frayed", all "[b]ecause of language" (51). As the testimonies affect her, she becomes unable to harness language, demystifying the writer's supposed power over language. When she attempts to do a Question and Answer session on a current affairs program, she recounts: "I stammer. I freeze. I am without language" (51). Ironically, it is language – Krog's primary tool as a journalist – that threatens her objectivity and autonomy as she listens to the hearings.

At the same time, Krog does not completely cast aside her identity as a writer. To resolve the tension between victim and listener, Laub maintains that the listener must "preserve his own separate place, position and perspective; a battleground for forces raging in himself, to which he has to pay attention and respect if he is to properly carry out his task. The listener, therefore, has to be at the same time a witness to the trauma witness and a witness to himself" (58). This, then, becomes Krog's challenge: to carve out a space for herself in which to witness the victims' narratives as well as her own response to them. The text suggests that she does so through the creation of poetry:

> A tone, an image, a line, mobilizes completely. I become myself. Truth and reconciliation do not enter my anarchy. They choke on betrayal and rage; they fall off my refusal to be moral. I write the broken line. For some brief moments of loose-limbed happiness, everything I am, every shivering, otherwise useless, vulnerable fiber and hypersensitive sense, comes together. A heightened phase of clarity and the glue stays…and somewhat breathless, I know: for this I am made. (50)

Unlike the underlying norms of journalism, poetry is not explicitly linked to an ideology of truth-telling, but instead serves as a vehicle for Krog to explore feelings of "betrayal and rage" that are inappropriate for her radio reports. While her news bulletins resemble a complete story, the "broken line" of poetry does not, and indeed, Krog seems to relish in unmaking this story, dismantling complete or totalizing definitions of truth and reconciliation. In contrast to these "moral" concepts, her poetry embraces "anarchy", communicating and embracing the ungovernable elements of the TRC and the testimonies presented before it. It is therefore through poetry that Krog may begin to arrange that which seems unarrangeable.

Despite the clarity Krog finds in poetry, she is nevertheless reluctant to produce art out of pain. Echoing Adorno's famous maxim, Krog laments, "No poetry should come forth from this. May my hand fall off if I write this…If I write this, I exploit and betray. If I don't, I die" (66). Yet Krog, like Adorno, is not forsaking poetry altogether. While Adorno is often cited for saying, "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," it is important to consider his pronouncement within its context. He reproaches what he calls a "total society," in which everything, including the construction of knowledge itself, is

implicated in the thought processes that led to Auschwitz (34).[34] If poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, it is because persisting in the artistic production of the very culture that produced Auschwitz risks participating in the continuation of that culture. Adorno's notion of the "barbaric" does not necessarily serve as a call to abolish poetic writing altogether but provides a reminder that post-Holocaust poetry, and in particular post-Holocaust German poetry, will always be haunted by its specters.

In a similar manner, Krog evinces a concern that the very language and culture in which she writes is inexorably responsible for the brutality of the past. She asks:

> Was apartheid the product of some horrific shortcoming in Afrikaner culture? Could one find the key to this in Afrikaner songs and literature, in beer and *braaivleis* [barbeque]? How do I live with the fact that all the words used to humiliate, all the orders given to kill, belonged to the language of my heart? At the hearings, many of the victims faithfully reproduced these parts of their stories in Afrikaans as proof of the bloody fingerprints upon them. (313)

While Krog loses language in her traumatized state, quite literally finding herself unable to speak, here she becomes dispossessed of her native language through its inextricable link to the agents of apartheid. Despite her connection to the victims, she remains incessantly tied to the perpetrators through shared language, literature, and culture. To Krog, Afrikaans is both the instrument and the proof of apartheid, and its use in

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[34] Adorno's full warning reads as follows: "The more total society becomes, the greater the reification of the mind and the more paradoxical its effort to escape reification on its own. Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism" (*Prisms*, 34). For more on Adorno's well-known statement, see Thomas Trezise's essay "Unspeakable", in *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, in which Trezise argues that suffering demands a particular stylistic explicitness through a form that "focuses critical attention on itself" (46).

testimonies, where victims resort to Afrikaans to repeat the very violence inflicted upon them, leaves behind the indelible, undeniable stain of "bloody fingerprints" pointing to the crimes of the past. Krog consequently struggles to write in a language that is bound up with the procedures and mind-sets that produced the atrocities of the past.

Even if Krog does not know how to continue writing or speaking in Afrikaans, it remains her language, her culture, and her literature, and she comes to feel an unrelenting impulse to engage with the testimonies in a non-exploitive way ("If I write this, I exploit and betray. If I don't, I die"). The question, then, shifts away from *whether or not* poetry should be written to *how* it may be written without exploiting the suffering of others and reinforcing the very culture that caused that suffering in the first place. While Krog's proximity to the TRC hearings traumatizes her, she does not necessarily seek to firmly reestablish the distance between herself and the witnesses; instead, she attempts to re-subjectivize herself into a position that recognizes the genealogy of her native tongue but is still capable of producing a form of poetry that may respond to the stories of the past.

In *Country of my Skull*, Krog presents a type of poetry that endeavors to address this concern when she reproduces a transcription of a testimony by a shepherd named Johannes Lekotse, who describes how the police unexpectedly raid his house and destroy his possessions, injuring him in the process. Rather than transcribing his testimony as a block of text, she fragments and enjambs his sentences into lines of poetry. Unlike many of the other testimonies in *Country of my Skull*, Krog includes the Commission's exchange with the witness, representing the questions posed by head commissioner Ilan Lax in addition to Lekotse's responses:

LAX: Did you or your son ever make a case against the police?

> LEKOTSE: We never took any initiative to report this matter to
> the police, because
>
> how can you report policemen to policemen?
> They were going to attack us.
> That is why I said to them,
> "Kill us all
> so that there is no trouble thereafter.
>
> It is much better to die—
> all of us."
> […]
> If one of these policemen is around here,
> I'll be happy if one of them comes to the stage
>
> and kills me immediately… (285)

Although the testimony is represented in poetic form, this form differs from the formulaic sound bites Krog produces. Unlike these sound bites, Lekotse's testimony is not intended to be "fantastic" or "sexy." The poem is delivered in free verse, which allows Krog to reproduce his testimony in "the exact words in which he spoke it", so that the poem takes shape from Lekotse's own voice rather than overtly structuring or rearranging his testimony (286). The clipped, enjambed lines of the poetic retelling further emphasize Lekotse's disorientation at being thrust out of his home and conveys the poignancy of his statements, including his assertion that it would have been better to die than be attacked by the police.

Following her rendering of "The Shepherd's Tale", Krog provides an extensive and thorough reading of the testimony, which performs several crucial functions: her analysis draws attention to the inherent literariness of the testimony itself, with its metaphors and symbolism, and it also provides greater insight into Lekotse's experience. For instance, Lekotse likens the police to jackals when he describes how they pull clothes from his closet, recounting his response to the police as follows: "I said, 'When a jackal

gets into the sheep / it does not do this – / please unpack neatly and pack them back neatly'" (279). Comparing the police officers to jackals conveys the force and brutality of their actions and points to the predatory nature of their behavior. In her analysis of the testimony, Krog notes that "since the jackal is the shepherd's greatest enemy, a threat to the flock night and day, he means that the security police exceeded his worst expectations of evil" (287). Through her reading, Krog is offered a glimpse into Lekotse's view of the world and the ways in which the raid disassembled his frameworks for understanding. When Lekotse speaks of the damage done to his house, he tells the Commission, "it's a pity I don't have a stepladder. / I will take you to my home to investigate" (282). To Krog, this statement speaks volumes regarding Lekotse's desire to be recognized and heard. She asserts:

> These two sentences form a poetic and imaginative climax in the story. Lekotse knows he cannot insist that the commission visit his house: but if only he had a ladder that he could set up, perhaps they could see his hut from the top of it, with its newly mended door. It is a yearning to be understood, to give the people in front of him a perspective on the impossible. A ladder would give the Truth Commission insight; it would raise his story from one plane to another, from the unreal to the real, from incomprehension to full understanding. (288)

Krog's analysis points to the destruction of Lekotse's world view, a moment of rupture that is materially reflected by the damage done to his house. Even though it has been repaired, the mended door only serves as a constant reminder of the harm that previously took place. Krog's rendition of Lekotse's testimony as poetry allows her to creatively view and respond to his narrative. As Louise Viljoen argues, "Krog speaks *to* the tale of

the shepherd by the interpretive attention she devotes to it", rather than reporting or speaking about it (45). If Krog earlier posits testimony as an address that seeks to be heard, Krog's analysis here reflects her effort to listen and reply; her reading of the shepherd's testimony addresses his words in return, acknowledging the complexity of his experience.

Krog's depiction of the testimony also calls attention to another dialogue, one that takes place between Lekotse and the head Commissioner, Ilan Lax. Her inclusion of Lax's voice acknowledges that testimony is influenced by the presence of the commissioners, who intervene with questions to shape the direction the testimony will take.[35] Displaying the dialogue between Lektose and Lax also points to a tension at the heart of their exchange, as the shepherd sometimes reasserts himself against the Commissioner's questions. "How can you report policemen to the policemen," Lekotse wants to know, after Lax asks him if he sought help from the police. Lekotse's counter-question undermines the logic of Lax's inquiry, showing that the world is *not* logical, that the very people entrusted with protecting the populace – the police – might not actually do so. In the world Lekotse inhabits, a world disrupted by apartheid, routine structures of knowledge and understanding no longer apply. Lekotse's counter-question therefore destabilizes the Commission's efforts to make sense out of a highly insensible experience. In another instance, after Lekotse states he was injured in his shoulder, Lax intercedes, calling attention to a potential disparity in Lekotse's testimony:

> LAX: In your statement, you mentioned you were injured in your ribs? I'm just helping you to remember.

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[35] As Krog explains, "The leader of testimony has two tasks: to steer the testimony in a direction that will yield enough facts of use to the commission, and to let the testimony unfold as spontaneously as possible, so that there can be healing and renewed self-respect" (286).

LEKOTSE: Are you not aware that
the shoulder is related to the *ribs*,
sir?

The shepherd's rejoinder indicates his own knowledge of the body, a knowledge that, as Krog says, comes from "slaughter[ing] many a sheep in his lifetime" (289). In addition, Lekotse once again responds to a question with another question, leaving his testimony open and unsettled. Questioning, in this case, does not necessarily lead to the recovery of stable or predictable responses.

The act of giving testimony thus contains the potential to disrupt the epistemological underpinnings of asking questions in search of clarification or concrete answers. The tension within the exchange between Lekotse and Lax leads Mark Sanders to assert that the act of testifying or telling, with all of its attendant ambiguities, has been transported "into the realm of *questioning*" (163, italics original). For Sanders, the Commissioner's questions are intended to search for the truth: "Here the 'telling' comes from the side of the agent of truth, whose questions, probing for the truth, enter a vein of counterfactuality as they call forth a story. The literary, in other words, comes from out of the law itself, and is in no sense incidental to it" (163). Sanders compellingly argues that it is through the process of the hearing, in its quest to reveal what happened, that allows for a story to emerge, and yet this story may not always corroborate or maintain the assumptions implied by the Commission's questions. In addition to this counterfactuality, testimony and literature are both linked through an element of unpredictability. If, as Krog maintains, poetry allows for the expression of "anarchy", for the emergence of the disordered and the unstable, then the testimonial act sometimes reflects this anarchy. Depicting Lekotse's testimony as a poem captures some of the ungovernability of his testimony, as the witness replies to questions about his experience. If testimony depends

on a system of address, then the exchange between Lax and Lekotse reveals that this address cannot be necessarily be dictated.

Testimony makes a demand to be heard, and indeed, Lekotse's narrative begins with the injuction: "Now listen very carefully, / because I'm telling you the story now" (279). At the same time, however, Lekotse's story does not necessarily fit within expected schemas of understanding, as the exchange between the shepherd and the commissioner indicates. In a similar way, poetry defies a simple understanding. In "Rams", Derrida explores "the claim [the poem] makes upon us, the demanding call a poem sets up, the obstinate but justified reminder of its right to stand up for its rights" (141). The "rights" to which Derrida refers includes the poem's "right to leave things undecided", which "belong to the poem itself, not to the poet or the reader" (145). In other words, the poem is not guaranteed to be transparently or inherently readable, offering up its meaning before an autonomous and objective reader who will then decipher the poem's content. Although the poetic text demands to be read, we as readers cannot necessarily know whether or not our responses are fully true, accurate, or exact. Through a reading of Paul Celan's poetry, Derrida reflects on the unpredictability surrounding poetic language:

> The certainty of a guaranteed reading would be the first inanity or the worst betrayal. This poem remains for me the place of a unique experience. The calculable and the incalculable are allied there not only in the language of another but in the foreign language of another who gives me…the occasion to countersign the future as much as the past: the unreadable is no longer opposed to the

> readable. Remaining unreadable, it secretes and keeps secret, in the same body, the chances of infinite, unfinished readings. (148)

Written in German, Celan's poems are, for Derrida, composed "in the foreign language of another", though it could be argued that all poetic language is "foreign" since it comes from outside the reader, demanding to be read even as it withholds a transparent meaning. The poem thus speaks in a foreign language despite the reader's knowledge of the language in which it is written. In attempting to read this other language, we may "countersign" the experience or event of which the poem speaks; that is, the poem grants us access to the experiences or perspectives of another – but we cannot be certain of fully understanding what it says to us. The poem is not therefore plainly readable, and yet this does not mean that it cannot be read at all: it is this very uncertainty and indecideability within the poem itself that draws us into it, that makes reading possible through an exploration of its language, as we return to read it again and again.

As it is depicted in *Country of my Skull*, Lekotse's testimony, rendered as a poem, speaks in "the foreign language of another". A member of the Sotho community, Lekotse gives his testimony in a language foreign to both Krog and the Commissioners. Beyond this literal level of foreignness, however, his narrative calls attention to the difficulties of reading or understanding testimony through predictable explanatory frameworks. In Krog's presentation of Lekotse's testimony, the question-and-answer format of the hearing undermines the certainty of a guaranteed reading. Lekotse's responses disrupt the underlying assumptions implied by the Commission's questions and its search for clarity. Even though Lekotse's answers disassemble the knowledge implied by Commissioner Lax's inquiries, this does not mean that Lekotse does not answer honestly. Lekotse offers

up his perspective to the Commission, attesting to his truth of what happened. As Krog's reading of Lekotse's wish for a ladder demonstrates, Lekotse is giving testimony in order to be understood, but any effort to understand him could mean that the questions put to him might not be fully clarified. In this case, poetic unreadability manifests in the unverifiability of the testimony, through its countering of a system of knowledge.

For Krog, then, the poetry that comes after apartheid aligns with her conception of testimony: it is open-ended and dialogic. In the connection of testimony with poetry, Krog gains access to the narratives of the witnesses in a way that allows her to listen and respond. She registers the hope that testifying before the TRC will catalyze the processes of remembrance and recovery, but at the same time, she recognizes that this undertaking is not guaranteed. The merging of journalistic and literary elements within *Country of my Skull* provides Krog with a means of conveying the struggles of speaking to the trauma of the past. *Country of my Skull* concludes with another breakdown of formal genres, in which Krog's final prose reflection that the TRC "made space for all of our voices" cede into verses of poetry:

> But I want to put it more simply. I want this hand of mine to write it. For us all;
> all voices; all victims:
> because of you
> this country no longer lies
> between us but within
>
> it breathes becalmed
> after being wounded
> in its wondrous throat (364)

As the prose transforms into poetry, the possibility for expression avails itself to the poet who now feels more connected to her altered society through "this hand of mine". The poem indicates that Krog's ability to write poetry does not come solely from herself as an

author but returns "because of you", because of those who address her through their testimonies. These testimonies contain the potential to restore the country, which Krog personifies as having been strangled, unable to speak or be heard, "wounded / in its wondrous throat". Now, however, Krog suggests the country's voice has returned:

> in the cradle of my skull
> it sings, it ignites
> my tongue, my inner ear, the cavity of my heart
> shudders towards the outline
> new in soft intimate clicks and gutturals
>
> of my soul the retina learns to expand
> daily because by a thousand stories
> I was scorched
>
> a new skin.

In the poem, listening to testimony is a multi-sensory experience; since the country's song "ignites" Krog's tongue, ear, and heart, this song is what gives her the ability to speak and to hear, and even to feel, once more. The poem depicts two related definitions of what it means to witness: one that characterizes witnessing as seeing and one that draws attention to bearing witness, or saying. As Krog listens to the emerging stories, her "retina learns to expand", and this emphasis on sight recalls the definition of witnessing as seeing an event take place. At the same time, the emergence of the country's voice arises through the production of "soft clicks and gutturals", evoking the testimony of Nomonde Calata and Professor Kondlo's remark that to witness Nomonde's cry was "to be present at the birth of language itself." Many of the testimonies included in *Country of my Skull* reflect a moment of impasse between seeing and saying, where language breaks down and is unable to fully represent the events of the past. By merging sight and speech,

however, Krog poetically positions testimony as moving beyond this impasse to transform both the country and herself.

Nevertheless, the act of transformation is not free from struggle. Even though the stories revive Krog, her exposure to them metaphorically "scorches" her skin. As Carli Coetzee says, "The image of scorched skin is not an innocent choice…It is an image of suffering, of scarring. But it is also an image that speaks of the desire to shed the white skin that connects the author to her ancestral shame" (693). According to Coetzee, Krog desires "to grow a new skin – scorched, dark perhaps. This new skin will be the mark of having been born into a new language and a new lineage; it will qualify her to be taken 'with you'" (693).[36] Yet it is not assured that Krog will be admitted into a new lineage, as the final lines of the poem leave open a supplication for forgiveness and relationship:

> I am changed forever. I want to say:
> forgive me
> forgive me
> forgive me
> You whom I have wronged, please
> take me
> with you. (365)

Krog's poem ends with a plea for forgiveness, one that cannot anticipate a guaranteed response. While she yearns to be transported, to leave her old skin behind, she recognizes that it is not entirely her decision, but that the choice will instead be decided by the "you" of her address. Krog cannot make a demand but instead must be invited to accompany "you" forward. Even as she learns to speak again, Krog realizes that she cannot speak alone: she must respond to "you", to the other, and in her response, she gives a measure

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[36] In reference to Krog's description of her new skin as scorched, Coetzee specifies that Krog yearns "to qualify for a black audience" (696). In other words, Coetzee maintains that Krog wants to move past the divide of "them/us", writing to all South Africans instead of only to white Afrikaners.

of control to the other, who may forgive and respond – or not. Thus *Country of my Skull* concludes, with Krog waiting for the response of the other.

Ending on this note of anticipation recalls the risk of interruption in any address, in which Krog might not receive a response, or might find herself speaking into silence. This risk, however, does not completely disavow the possibility of communication. Although testimony does not offer complete certainty in *Country of my Skull*, Krog acknowledges – and even seems to desire—that testimony may contain the potential to transform and give meaning to suffering. At the same time, she suggests that the process of testifying acts on and unsettles stable definitions of certainty, truth and witnessing. Through her consideration of the testimonies presented before the TRC, Krog does not try to gloss over fragments, silences, or blind-spots within the narratives, but acknowledges these potentially disruptive moments as inherent to the process of testifying to painful or traumatic experiences. For Krog, these moments do not necessarily lead to recovery, in the sense of a fully attainable, representable past, but discovery – a more creative engagement with the traumatic past.

3

Breaking the Script:

Discourses of Disease and Healing in

David Park's *The Truth Commissioner*

I

While Antjie Krog was reporting on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, she was interviewed by a radio journalist from Northern Ireland, who travelled to South Africa to investigate her country's efforts to foster reconciliation and forgiveness. After the interview concluded, Krog asked the Irish journalist if he thought such a process would ever be possible in Northern Ireland. As Krog recounts, "He immediately shook his head and said: 'It will never work in Ireland, too many Protestants, never!'" (*Conditional Tense* 36). And yet a process of truth and reconciliation is exactly what David Park imagines in his 2008 novel *The Truth Commissioner*. Set in Belfast, Park's fictional truth commission is modeled on South Africa's, providing a forum for victims to testify and perpetrators to confess their crimes in exchange for amnesty. The novel responds to one of the fundamental political narratives that has come to be associated with the truth commission as a form of transitional justice: specifically, the narrative that a national process of memory recuperation contributes to collective healing. *The Truth Commissioner*, however, articulates a weary skepticism towards this trajectory of recovery and repair, presenting a Commission that relies on an overly-formulaic rhetoric of healing. As such, Park's

Northern Irish Truth Commission appears scripted and cynical. The novel continually disrupts the Commission's scripts of healing through pervading images of illness and disease, revealing the extent to which the violence of the past refuses to be contained or assimilated by existing discourses of national recovery.

By imagining how the legacy of the Troubles might be publicly addressed, *The Truth Commissioner* intervenes in one of the defining concerns of Northern Ireland's social and political landscape: how a divided society confronts a violent and traumatic history. The Belfast Agreement of 1998 negotiated a fragile peace following the thirty-year period of sectarian violence known as the Troubles, and significantly, the language of the Agreement stipulates that a necessary component of successful reconciliation includes the need for survivors to voice their experiences:

> The tragedies of the past have left a deep and profoundly regrettable legacy of suffering. We must never forget those who have died or been injured, and their families. But we can best honour them through a fresh start, in which we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual truth, and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all. ("Declaration of Support", para. 2)

In this way, the Agreement's language is not so different from that of the final report issued by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which calls for disclosing "the truth about past gross violations of human rights" with the belief that such a task would promote "reconciliation and national unity" (I:49). Through similar rhetoric, the Belfast Agreement takes up one of the central premises associated with social reconciliation: namely, that acknowledging past atrocities will initiate a national process

of recovery. As Chapter 2 discussed in detail, scholars of transitional justice argue that this process typically reflects Freudian theories of coming to terms with trauma and maintain that the dissemination and acknowledgement of testimony enables a public process of letting go. The Belfast Agreement suggests that, in Northern Ireland, reconciliation is contingent upon the development of a future-oriented focus or "fresh start"; as Stefanie Lehner says, "The rhetorical appeal [of the Belfast Agreement] to consign the conflict and its legacy to the distant past discloses a political strategy enforcing a distinct break between the past and the present, in order to open a space for the future" (273).

However, one of the central questions of this chapter is whether such a firm break between past and present is fully possible in post-Agreement Northern Ireland. Though the language of the Agreement is marked by an injunction to remember and reconcile, no official state-sponsored system has concretely emerged wherein survivors may impart their stories.[37] While some governmental measures have been taken to investigate the Troubles – such as the establishment of the Consultative Group of the Past, which explored the possibility of forming a Legacy Commission to conduct a process of information recovery – there has been much debate regarding how or even if a public forum for remembrance should successfully proceed.[38] In their report on Troubles

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[37] In the absence of an official truth commission, the years since the signing of the Agreement have witnessed cultural efforts to disseminate stories from the Troubles. One of the most prominent of these efforts includes the Belfast-based group Healing Trough Remembering, which collects personal testimonies from both loyalist and republican communities. Healing Through Remembering encourages the emergence of a more multifaceted account of the Troubles, particularly calling for stories from those who "felt their experience of the conflict has been ignored" (see http://healingthroughremembering.org/).

[38] The Consultative Group was inaugurated in June 2007 by Secretary of State Peter Hain to determine "the best way to deal with the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland", such performing

remembrance, for instance, The Faith and Politics Institute comments on the limitations of a Truth Commission for Northern Ireland:

> There is no necessary link between truth and reconciliation. The truth may bring anger and further polarisation. The truth proclaimed by a Commission may not be accepted. This is because there are competing truths in situations of conflict; what has happened is embedded in rival narratives of why it happened and who was responsible. Truth Commissions cannot bring the arguments of the past to a conclusion. (*Remembering and Forgetting* 18)[39]

By indicating that the connection between truth and reconciliation is not necessarily inherent or logical, the Faith and Politics report outlines one of the primary criticisms of establishing a Truth Commission in Northern Ireland. In the absence of an agreed social narrative, any claim to the truth may be challenged, meaning that a public process of exhuming the past cannot guarantee to further the aim of reconciliation.

Moreover, scholars have doubted the extent to which conventional approaches to public remembrance and reconciliation are capable of addressing Northern Ireland's legacy of violence. In her evaluation of the Consultative Group, Aoife Duffy raises the concern that current post-Agreement discourse "does not further our understanding of societal reconciliation, but places the concept squarely within a Judeo-Christian discourse of forgiveness" (33). As Duffy points out, this formulation may resonate with the Catholic and Protestant communities of Northern Ireland, though she concludes that "a

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investigations of historical cases (see http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/victims/docs/consultative_group/cgp_230109_report.pdf).

[39] A U.S.-based non-profit, the Faith and Politics Group has focused on issues of partisanship and racial violence in the southern U.S. and South Africa as well as the sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland.

theological approach to reconciliation may not be appropriate for a transitional justice mechanism in a society where religious symbolism has been manipulated and religious affiliation targeted by sectarian violence during the 30-year conflict" (33). While Duffy cautions against adopting preconceived notions of reconciliation – such as that espoused by the South African TRC, which was rooted in Judeo-Christian rhetoric – much of the discourse surrounding collective recovery is based on these existing definitions. In the absence of a rhetoric specific to Northern Ireland, how best to articulate the notion of reconciliation remains a vexed question. In addition to the problem surrounding the conception of social reconciliation, Troubles discourse has not settled on a concrete definition of victimhood. Sir Kenneth Bloomfield's 1998 report on victims asserts that any person "engaged in unlawful activity who is killed or injured in pursuit of it is a victim only of his own criminality" and will assume the burden of guilt in the criminal and civil sphere (35). The Consultative Group, meanwhile, relies on a more expanded definition of victimhood to encompass any person who has been physically or psychologically injured because of the conflict (Victims and Survivors para. 3). Hence, part of the problem with confronting the past stems in finding a language with which to address it, a language capable of framing the conflict in a way that resonates with Northern Irish society.

However, the separation in Northern Irish society along republican or loyalist lines suggests that narratives and memories of the Troubles cannot be discussed or understood in concrete or uncontested terms. According to Frantz Fanon, violent political conflicts produce "a world cut in two", one that is "divided into two compartments…two zones", within which people are positioned according to "the fact of belonging to, or not

belonging to", one zone or the other (29, 31).[40] In addition to the political division between republican and loyalist communities, the processes of grief and mourning have become polarized across the axis of violence, creating in effect two cultures of remembrance. The related questions of how to remember the past and how to reconcile it have become inextricably bound up with the internecine nature of the Troubles. Patricia Lundy and Mark McGovern note that many in the republican community have actively argued for the necessity of remembering and accounting for the Troubles, while at the same time, many in the loyalist community maintain that the country would benefit most from a process of willful amnesia (36). In the post-Agreement era, longstanding sectarian rivalries have been reconstituted as a conflict over cultural memory, over how – or even if – the past should be remembered. Given the competing perspectives on how to address the past, Lundy and McGovern have remarked that "what is perhaps most distinctive about Northern Ireland's approach to dealing with thirty years of violent conflict is that, as often as not, it has raised another *a priori* question: should we remember the past at all?" (29). This question has concerned literary and cultural critics since the Agreement's signing; Edna Longley, for instance, maintains that despite the apparent division between "those cultures that aim at amnesia, and those that aim at total recall", collective memory exists on a "spectrum" somewhere in between (224). For Longley, a certain amount of amnesia is nevertheless necessary for bridging the loyalist and republican segments of society, and she argues that "solving Northern Ireland's problems may be equally inseparable from remembering the past in new ways: a remembering that enables

[40] In Northern Ireland, the two zones have been physically as well as mentally divided since the early 1970's by the Peace Wall, a thirty-foot high edifice of concrete, corrugated steel, and razor wire built along Cupar Way in Belfast.

forgetting" (224). As an example of a remembering that allows for forgetting, Longley recounts the following anecdote from a debate in Derry regarding the twenty-sixth Bloody Sunday anniversary: "I suggested that we should build a monument to Amnesia and forget where we put it" (231).[41]

At the same time, other critics call for an alternative perspective, cautioning against forgetting too quickly. According to this view, the underlying causes of the Troubles remain largely unaddressed and must be acknowledged if reconciliation is to be achieved. Colin Graham, for instance, argues that the language of the peace process has been structured in such a way as to preclude engagement with the issues of identity and cultural difference that drive the conflict. He cautions against "constructing a political process which forgets rather than remembers, which detaches itself for survival, which regards identity, in its widest sense, as a danger rather than as the very substance of the matter", asserting that without a recognition of the divisions that define Northern Irish society, the country will remain caught in "patterns of repression and recurrence" (180). Robert F. Garrett evinces a similar concern that the problems of the past might return to perpetuate a "cyclical violence" if forgetting occurs too quickly and historical traumas are left unresolved (8).

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[41] The ways in which Catholics and Protestants approach remembrance differently has recently become a focal point for scholars of Irish history and memory. According to Ian McBride, the Catholic version of history focuses upon memories of subjugation and struggle, while the Protestant self-image envisages "an endless repetition of repelled assaults, without hope of absolute finality or of fundamental change" (15). In her article "The Rising, the Somme, and Modern Memory", Longley asserts that these opposing traditions of remembrance, which represent the different denominational cultures of Protestants and Catholics, can be described as "providential" and "redemptive" respectively. Longley begins that essay with the statement: "Commemorations are as selective as sympathies. They honour *our* dead, not your dead" (29). That is, practices of remembrance are held in tension with other communities and histories that they exclude.

Northern Ireland has therefore been characterized as a place in which memory itself has become a part of the complex and ongoing disputes surrounding the Troubles. Deliberate acts of remembering or forgetting have emerged as two alternative frameworks for addressing the past, though both are potentially problematic. Brandon Hamber, who has studied the processes of reconciliation in South Africa and Northern Ireland, asserts that advocates of the view that "any society coming out of violence *should remember*" must also reckon with the "interplay between remembering, forgetting and moving on after decades of violence" (2, italics original). Arguing that "it is not clear how forgetting the past, or alternatively, remembering the past, actually avoids or provokes political violence in the future", he suggests that the merit of either remembering or forgetting remains debatable (3). Hamber likewise notes that remembering and forgetting are often embraced simultaneously by leaders such as Nelson Mandela, who approached South Africa's history of violence by voicing a concurrent desire to "forget the past" and "build [the] country" (2). As Hamber suggests, neither the injunction to remember nor the call for cultural amnesia necessarily solves the dilemma of how to approach a contested past.

In Northern Ireland, furthermore, the question is not only whether the past should be *deliberately* remembered or forgotten, but also if it is even possible to fully contain or regulate a past that is not fixed or stable. That is, the past does not *stay* past but continues to have a direct and uncanny bearing on the present. Ian McBride explains:

> In Ireland, as is well known, the interpretation of the past has always been at the heart of national conflict…After the eruption of the Northern Irish Troubles, when the recrudescence of ancestral hatred perplexed outside observers, there was

> renewed academic interest in the communal psychology of the protagonists. 'Ireland,' one political scientist discovered, 'is almost a land without history, because the troubles of the past are relived as contemporary events'. (1-2)

Quoting Richard Rose, McBride indicates that in Ireland, there is little separation between past and present. Instead, the conflicts of the past are perceived as continual and enduring. Described as "almost a land without history", Ireland becomes positioned as a country in stasis, outside of normative historical development. Rather than conforming to a notion of time moving forward, the temporal distance between past and present appears to vanish.

In discourses of Northern Irish remembrance, the centrality and weight of the past is depicted as overwhelming and perhaps even inescapable, exercising a determining influence over the present. For instance, novelist Dermot Bolger has written that the Irish are "so bizarrely entangled with history that we must go back three centuries to explain any fight outside a chip shop" (qtd. in Walker 62). In other words, the fixation with the past is inextricably linked to a violent conflict that is viewed as irresolvable and unceasing. The way that Northern Ireland is embroiled in the past, with memories of conflict constantly threatening to resurface, is indicative of what Pierre Nora calls the "terrorism" of memory, or a form of memory that "is ready to impose itself by any means", one that is characterized not by what is specifically being remembered but the "violence by which it makes itself heard" (Buob 9).[42] Memory, in this sense, becomes

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[42] Nora first coined the phrase in 2005, when a group of French historians protested a series of controversial laws that mandated an institutionalized form of memory. The laws in question all concerned the ways in which traumatic histories should be publicly written and remembered, such as one stipulating that scholarly disciplines recognize the positive role of the French presence abroad, especially in North Africa as well as another concerning crimes against humanity which outlawed Holocaust denial. While some of the laws were eventually retracted, the French

more than an injunction or demand to recollect the past, transformed instead into an overwhelming imposition, a violent return of the past that intrudes upon and dominates the present.

One of the concerns with Troubles remembrance, then, is the vehement and possibly uncontrollable resurgence of the past. Memories of the Troubles inflect the present in unpredictable ways, leading Oona Frawley to refer to the conflict as one of Ireland's "memory cruxes", which "center around perceived traumatic historical spaces that pose questions and offer conflicting, oppositional and sometimes intensely problematic answers about the way that a culture considers its past, and that are crucial in the shaping of social identities" (2).[43] According to Frawley, cultural trauma engenders cultural memory, which in turn recalls cultural trauma in a transfixing circular formulation. The contested space of Troubles memory represents a continuing debate, for as Frawley says, "one of the challenges in considering the Troubles is that we are studying flux: there has been no final assessment of the ways in which this period has impacted cultural memory nor of the ways in which this period will be negotiated in the Northern Irish future" (13). An example of the ongoing and contested process of remembrance may be found in Boston College's Belfast Project, an oral history archive collected from members of paramilitary groups involved in the Troubles. As Project Coordinator Ed Moloney writes, the archive is intended "to collect a story of the Troubles that otherwise would be lost, distorted or rewritten, deliberately by those with a vested

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historians viewed them as part of a larger battle over what the French call "le devoir de memoire," the duty of memory, and a sense that the past has become subject to political manipulation.

[43] Frawley also discusses the Famine as another of Ireland's memory cruxes. See her edited collection *Memory Ireland, Volume 3: The Famine and the Troubles* (Syracuse University Press, 2014).

interest, or otherwise by the passage of time or the distortion wrought in the retelling" (8).[44] In addition, the interviews reveal "the motives and mindsets of participants in the conflict, a resource of inestimable value for future studies attempting better to understand the phenomenology of societal violence" (Moloney 2). While the Project provides insight into the mentalities that informed the conflict, its proximity to the events and people involved in the conflict have already proved controversial. The interviews were recorded on the understanding that they would not be released until the individual speakers have died, and as a result, the coming decades may witness the revelation of intimate details about the violence of the Troubles that are as yet unknown. Past events will continue to inform Troubles discourse as more stories continue to surface, adding to and possibly complicating current narratives of the Troubles. Even in processes that seek to further understand or redress the past, the impact of memory recuperation is not without the potential for reopening old wounds.

As a work of fiction, David Park's political thriller *The Truth Commissioner* provides an exploration of uncompleted and uncomfortable Troubles memories that insistently resurface. The novel does not seek to clarify or expose truths about the Troubles but instead directly interrogates the processes of truth recovery and societal reconciliation. While *The Truth Commissioner* evokes the discourses of remembering, forgetting, and reconciling that provide the foundation for the social and political

[44] Best known for his coverage of the Troubles, Moloney is an Irish journalist who worked with scholars at Boston College as well as the historian Thomas Hachey to interview 40 people from both sides of the conflict: 26 former members of the IRA and 20 members of the UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force, a paramilitary group that wanted Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom). Moloney compiled and annotated the testimonies of IRA member Brendan Hughes and UVF member David Ervine in his book *Voices from the Grave*, which details the purpose of the Belfast Project.

landscape of the post-Agreement era, the novel shifts away from the question of whether the past should be actively remembered or deliberately forgotten. Rather, the novel asks how it is possible to address the unbidden and disturbing return of the past, including memories that cannot be dispelled and threaten to occlude the present. In its investigation of the problematic and seemingly inescapable past, *The Truth Commissioner* interrogates the link between public disclosure and collective healing. Through two crucial ways, Park's novel engages in a dialogue about the possibilities and limitations of the truth commission as a legal mechanism for redress. First, the novel presents the fictionalized Northern Irish Truth Commission as a scripted, almost automated process designed to carry out a pre-established narrative of healing. Ostensibly, the Commission aims to reinforce the script of healing, although the specific complexities of individual cases continually jeopardize this script. Second, the text draws on metaphors of illness and disease to disassemble the rhetoric of healing, presenting the past as something that is itself infectious and will return to contaminate the present. The metaphors of disease and contagion, furthermore, suggest that the Commission is infected from within. In the novel's most suspenseful hearing, the emergence of an unpredictable testimony upends the discourses of healing and closure, destabilizing the Commission through an autoimmune logic in which its very legal structures and proceedings turn on themselves. *The Truth Commissioner* suggests that any attempt to neutralize the past will fail, presenting a fictional process that cannot escape the country's legacy of violence.

II

David Park has stated that as a Northern Irish writer, he "felt a moral obligation…to deal with the Troubles. Our history, our situation, could be almost claustrophobic, but it wasn't something that could be ignored" (*Culture Northern Ireland*).[45] In *The Truth Commissioner*, Park asks what price is to be paid for revisiting this history by focusing on four characters who are each haunted by acts they committed twenty years previously. The novel follows Henry Stanfield, a human rights lawyer who reluctantly agrees to head the newly formed Commission; Francis Gilroy, a former IRA volunteer turned politician; James Fenton, a retired Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) detective; and Michael Madden, another former IRA member now living as an undocumented immigrant in Florida. These four characters converge around the case of Connor Walshe, a fifteen-year-old boy who was killed by the IRA for working briefly as a police informant. When the novel's Commission begins, Connor's body has yet to be found, and the circumstances of his death become the subject of one of its hearings. Eventually, Gilroy, who now holds the title of Minister of Children and Culture within the newly integrated government, becomes implicated in Connor's murder. His possible culpability threatens to destabilize the future of the post-Agreement government, and his involvement in the crime provides one of the novel's central concerns: whether Gilroy

[45] In the same interview with *Culture Northern Ireland*, Park says that when he finished writing *The Truth Commissioner*, he knew he "would never write anything on that subject again". For Park, the Troubles came to dominate Northern Ireland's literary imagination to the point where that era "acted as a brake on our creative development, but now there are exciting possibilities for art to flourish". Since *The Truth Commissioner*, Park has looked beyond the borders of Northern Ireland. His 2012 novel *The Light of Amsterdam* is set in the first European city Park visited, one that represents for him "the wider world", and his 2014 novel *The Poets' Wives* is set across continents and centuries, providing a fictional consideration of the wives of William Blake, Osip Mandelstam, and an unnamed contemporary Irish poet.

should be publicly held responsible for the crime, or if the Truth Commission should overlook his guilt in favor of maintaining the country's fragile but important political stability. To further complicate matters, the novel never explicitly exposes Gilroy as Connor's murderer, but leaves his role in Connor's death ambiguous. As *The Truth Commissioner* weaves together conflicting stories, forced confessions, and narrative gaps, it suggests that each personal story brings a different understanding of what truth, closure, and healing might mean.

Although *The Truth Commissioner* is a work of fiction, the novel frequently alludes to historical occurrences and well-known public figures. Most notably, the character of Francis Gilroy calls to mind Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams, who, like the fictional Gilroy, is thought to have occupied a leadership position in the IRA and has since taken up a prominent role in post-Agreement politics. Adams's supposed involvement in the IRA continues to raise questions about how the association between current politicians and paramilitary groups complicates attempts to uncover the truth and reconcile the past. One of the controversies most closely associated with Adams is the disappearance and murder of Jean McConville in 1972 after the IRA accused her of passing information to British forces. Even though the IRA has taken responsibility for McConville's death, her body was not found until three decades after her disappearance, and no specific IRA members have been charged with her murder. Several former IRA members have claimed that Adams ordered her death; in his testimony for Boston College's Belfast Project, Brendan Hughes directly states that Adams orchestrated

McConville's disappearance (Moloney 130).[46] For readers familiar with Adams's suspected complicity in McConville's death, *The Truth Commissioner* establishes parallels between Adams and Gilroy, who is similarly implicated in the death of Connor Walshe, another supposed informer whose body remain lost for decades. While Gilroy does not necessarily represent a direct fictionalization of Adams, the novel provides a "real" counterpart to this character through its allusions to recognizable political controversies. Hence, the novel raises concerns similar to those surrounding Adams's entanglement in the McConville murder: specifically, if such public figures should be held legally accountable for Troubles-era murders and disappearances, and how their alleged culpability might jeopardize the tenuous political stability of the present. The novel's link between Gilroy and Adams not only serves as a reminder that history itself is often messy and incomplete but also gestures towards the enduring implications of Troubles-era violence in the present-day.

Since *The Truth Commissioner* establishes a heightened sense of tension regarding the continuing impacts of Troubles history on contemporary politics, it is commonly described as a political thriller.[47] With its narrative revolving around Connor's disappearance, *The Truth Commissioner* maintains a state of suspense to convey anxiety over the persistence of the troubled and unsettling past. As Ciaran Carson writes in his

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[46] Adams has denied his involvement both with the IRA and McConville's disappearance, and he has not been criminally charged for her murder. The Northern Irish Public Prosecution Service's decision not to prosecute Adams is detailed in Henry McDonald's article "Gerry Adams will not face charges over Jean McConville murder" in *The Guardian* (29 September 2015). For more on McConville's disappearance and the ongoing effects of her death on current Northern Irish politics, see Patrick Radden Keefe's article "Where the Bodies are Buried" in The New Yorker (26 March 2015).

[47] Joseph O'Connor's review in *The Guardian* (8 February 2008) and Joseph O'Neill's review *The New York Times* (30 March 2008) both refer to the novel's suspenseful plot, while the BBC adapted the novel into a film classified as a political thriller in 2016.

review of the novel, "Reading *The Truth Commissioner*, wanting to know what happens next, we are inevitably drawn to what happened before" (*The Independent*, 29 Feb. 2008). To intensify the ambiguity that surrounds Troubles history, the novel persistently calls attention to the unsolved status of Connor's murder to generate questions about the past. *The Truth Commissioner's* label as a thriller positions it within one of the most popular literary genres for representing the Troubles; since 1969, there have been more than four hundred thrillers written about the political situation in Northern Ireland.[48] Because of its characterization as a thriller, *The Truth Commissioner* initially seems to deviate from other types of trauma narratives, which often acquire force through their resistance to conventional forms of aesthetic pleasure. Many works of literature concerned with the aftermath of violence unsettle the imperatives of verbal, linear storytelling by conveying silences, narrative gaps, and traumatic flashbacks or repetitions.[49] The thriller genre, meanwhile, relies on more familiar narrative codes, including the revelation of past mysteries to conclude with an anticipatory moment of resolution. As Shareem Black indicates, the aesthetic norms that define the thriller are often said to be at odds with other literary discourses of trauma and grief: "Literary conventions, particularly of finality and resolution, press harder on the thriller than they do on the serious dramatic novel; it is a genre that tolerates lower levels of ambiguity in its overall effect. It is thus invested in a form of knowingness and knowability that many argue is destroyed by atrocity" (49). Black observes, however, that the past few decades have witnessed an interest in the thriller as a genre capable of affording "sophisticated"

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[48] See Aaron Kelly, *The Thriller and Northern Ireland Since 1969: Utterly Resigned Terror* Hampshire: Ashgate, 2005.

[49] Bowen's *The Heat of the Day*, for example, confounds language through its use of double and triple negatives.

commentary on the workings of political violence (50). In Northern Ireland, the genre's defining features of suspense and uncertainty have worked to portray the tense and insecure atmosphere of the Troubles. Novelist Glen Patterson remarks that many Troubles thrillers have focused on "characters that had been involved with violence in the past…because the past wasn't completely dealt with" (2). With its rise in popular appeal, the Troubles thriller has become a genre of its own, one that indexes the sense of unfinished business that has come to inhabit the post-Agreement literary landscape.

In many ways, *The Truth Commissioner* fulfills the requirements of the thriller genre – it is a more straightforward read than Antjie Krog's *Country of my Skull*, for instance – yet much of the novel's interest lies in moments when its subverts the conventions of the thriller, such as its refusal to definitively expose Gilroy as Connor's murderer. If Elizabeth Bowen's novel *The Heat of the Day* disrupts some elements of the spy genre, *The Truth Commissioner* functions similarly, refusing to fully conform to the logic of the thriller. Rather than resolving the tension it engenders, the novel gradually builds to and concludes in a state of suspense. In casting off the expected conventions of the thriller at crucial moments and in leaving its central mysteries unanswered, the novel undermines any true sense of finality in its effort to confront the violence of Troubles. Instead, the unceasing threat that traumatic incidences will resurface defers resolution and prohibits its characters from fully breaking with patterns of the past. Through its depiction of the fictional Truth Commission hearings, the novel induces anxiety surrounding the revelation of past truths, which seem more likely to result in renewed outbreaks of violence than in social reconciliation.

From its outset, *The Truth Commissioner* engages with and troubles the notion that publicly addressing Northern Ireland's past will lead to collective healing. The novel immediately draws attention to discourses of healing and restoration through its Biblical epigraph:

> Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda having five porches.
>
> In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water.
>
> For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had. (St John 5, 2-4)

Despite the image of healing offered here, the novel itself does not reinforce any permanent impression of repair or recovery. Instead, *The Truth Commissioner* critically and self-reflectively unsettles this image by focusing more on the idea of "troubling" the past than on resolving it. The Commission's investigations reopen unsolved cases – such as the case of Connor Walshe – and in doing so, the hearings disturb the past, evoking unnerving and distressing memories. The novel suggests that attempts to induce collective healing come at the expense of re-opening a problematic past, a move that more often than not results in further societal fragmentation rather than in a renewed sense of wholeness.

Following the epigraph's reference to healing, *The Truth Commissioner* almost immediately introduces a degree of skepticism into the discourse of national recuperation. The novel begins in South Africa, where head commissioner Stanfield and his team of

younger colleagues travel to meet with participants from the South African TRC before embarking on a similar process in Northern Ireland. Stanfield, however, shatters any sense of idealism within the workings of the TRC and the transferability of its ethos to Northern Ireland, viewing the trip as nothing more than "three weeks of suffocating, endless meetings" and "long pointless journeys on dusty roads to the townships to talk to those who had participated in the Truth and Reconciliation process and the interminable lectures on the need for *ubantu*, the African philosophy of humanism" (10-11). For Stanfield, the South African TRC has been stripped of any affective force it might have possessed, so that its procedures and philosophies become pedantic and seemingly irrelevant to the Northern Irish team. Even before the Commission in Northern Ireland officially commences, the trip to South Africa undermines any hope of discovering how healing or reconciliation might be meaningfully achieved.

In addition to the presentation of the South African TRC as tedious and uninspiring, the novel describes another, unexpected instance in South Africa that offers evocative and disturbing implications for the Northern Irish Truth Commission. Shortly before the legal team returns to Belfast, they spontaneously embark on a cage diving excursion that takes them within close proximity to two large sharks. Though the novel presents this moment as seemingly frivolous, it nonetheless becomes a powerful image for the undertaking they are about to assume. As two sharks circle closer, Stanfield thinks they are "bigger than he had anticipated": "One comes close, a sudden disdainful shadow…The other has gore in its mouth as with a quiver of its tail it shakes blood through the water like exploding dye, its jaws shaking the find the way a terrier might shake a rat" (15). Stanfield's encounter with the sharks becomes an emblem for how he

comes to understand the Commission's work of exploring the past. Like the sharks, he will eventually realize that the case of Connor Walshe is "bigger than he had anticipated" and full of predatory dangers that imperil his public reputation as well as the integrity of the Commission. For instance, in an attempt to distance Gilroy from the Truth Commission's proceedings, two mysterious men later approach Stanfield, encouraging him to "close [his] eyes at the required time" and blackmailing him with photographs taken of him with a female escort (257). In this moment, Stanfield "thinks of the shiny sleekness of the shark coming alongside the boat and he shivers a little" (258). The image of the sharks remains with Stanfield more strongly than any other experience from his time in South Africa, returning to him at one of his most vulnerable moments. From its very beginnings, the Truth Commission contains the underlying suggestion of a threat, of possible violence and exploitation, rather than fully functioning as the mechanism of healing it is meant to be.

The encounter with the sharks takes on an additional metaphoric resonance through the Northern Irish team's overawed response to swimming alongside these creatures, a response which illustrates tension between the desire to speak of extreme experiences and the difficulty of doing so. Once they have safely returned to their boat, Stanfield's colleagues are unable to fully articulate their experience, and Stanfield "is struck most by how their paucity of language leaves them unable to communicate what they have seen. The words tumble out in broken, incoherent fragments until eventually they are reduced to single words and the air quivers like a single plucked string with shouts of 'unbelievable', 'wow', 'cool', and, perhaps the most popular, 'wicked'" (15). It is in this instance of apparent levity, through the absence of concrete or meaningful

language with which to describe the cage diving experience, that the novel most closely conveys the attempt to formulate an experience that seems to lie beyond the bounds of expression. If Antjie Krog's descriptions of the South African TRC focused on what could *not* be properly stated before the Commission, on the silences and gaps in moments of testimony that pointed to almost unimaginable experiences, it is this passage in Park's novel that brings Stanfield and his team closer to the difficulties of testifying than any other. Unknowingly, the lawyers experience firsthand the anxiety between the need to speak and the inadequacy of language. However, they never come to realize the metaphorical implications their excursion has on the process they are about to begin; the novel denies any grand moment of revelation or self-reflexivity for the characters most closely involved in the Commission's proceedings.

Stanfield's jaded response to the South African TRC introduces a skeptical tone into the narrative of healing put forth by the novel's epigraph, a tone which comes to undermine each step of the Commission's process, from its inauguration to the hearings themselves. The Commission commences with a formal function at Hillsborough Castle designed to honor the commissioners and celebrate the proceedings, an event designed to reinforce the rhetoric of collective healing. As Stanfield listens to a speech made by the British Prime Minister, he inwardly questions the efficacy of the Prime Minister's words to initiate recovery:

> It's a soft-centered meringue of a speech that leaves Stanfield feeling he has overdosed on sugar as he endures the endless references to healing and closure. He hears the word healing so often that he wants to stand up and shout perhaps they should have employed doctors instead of representatives of the law.

> Thankfully there is no attempted knock-out punchline such as the hand of history but only a whimpering petering out with tautological references to momentous moments and rather tired images of building the future. (49-50)

For Stanfield, language – at least as it is presented here, as saccharine and empty – provides an ineffective remedy for recovering from the violence of the past. Despite the repeated comments on healing, the language of the Prime Minister's speech does not seem to advance the aim of reconciliation in any consequential way. This scene, moreover, recalls Prime Minister Tony Blair's speech shortly after the Belfast Agreement was established, which was also given at Hillsborough Castle: "I feel the hand of history upon our shoulder with respect to this, I really do, and I just think we need to acknowledge that and respond to it. Now maybe it is impossible to find a way through, maybe even with the best faith in the world you can't do it, but it is right to try so I am here to try" (*The Guardian* 26 April 2007). By alluding to Tony Blair's speech, the novel asks if the dominant discourses on healing are concrete enough to "find a way through"; in other words, the text challenges the capacity of such rhetoric to generatively address the past in a way that will effect change.

The novel implies that if any meaningful degree of healing is to occur, a more incisive discourse for engaging with and discussing the Troubles is required, and yet *The Truth Commissioner* does not provide an alternate rhetoric for discussing the past. Instead, the novel suggests that the primary discourse of healing is limited by its very association with the processes of the law upon which the Commission depends. In the passage above, Stanfield interrogates the purpose of the law and his role as a commissioner, specifically questioning whether it is the responsibility of the law to

provide healing or closure when he wonders if "they should have employed doctors instead of representatives of the law". While the Commission does not function as a court of law, it is nevertheless a legal body with the power to subpoena witnesses – for example, neither Fenton nor Michael wish to testify, though they are legally compelled to answer their summons – and the ability to grant or deny amnesty. In asking if healing comprises one of the law's functions, Stanfield challenges the very purpose of the Commission, one that presupposes a connection between disclosing the past and achieving reconciliation in the present. This purpose is literally scripted into the Commission's proceedings; at the beginning of every hearing, Stanfield reads the same opening remarks from an autocue, though after several repetitions, "the words are lodged in his memory" (317). According to Stanfield's script, the purpose of the hearings is threefold: first, to "remember those who have died or suffered", second, to "initiate a process of healing through the establishment of truth and openness", and finally, to offer amnesty to those who provide "full disclosure and a full and truthful account of the incident for which they are seeking amnesty" (317). Stanfield's preamble reveals the ideal trajectory implicit in the Commission's workings, although the novel undermines the sense that this narrative of recovery will be fulfilled through its distrust of the rhetoric of healing.

As head commissioner, Stanfield publicly embodies the authority of the law, though privately he remains suspicious of its workings. Considering the group of idealistic young lawyers working on the commission with him, who believe they are "building a new bridge to healing and forgiveness", Stanfield wonders, "So how would they feel if he were to tell them now that it's all been for the optics, that what will happen

and how it will happen has already been agreed, mapped out, and the fixity of the main boundaries established like every continent after every war?" (17). Although the legal proceedings ostensibly call attention to past atrocities for the first time, Stanfield questions the law's ability to do so genuinely. The metaphor that inspires his younger colleagues – "building a new bridge to healing and forgiveness" – echoes the Prime Minister's speech that frames the Commission as "building a bridge to the future". Like the opening remarks on Stanfield's autocue, these idioms comprise a type of script, one that is designed to symbolically reinforce the notion that the Commission will reconcile the divisiveness of the Troubles. As Stanfield has indicated, however, these platitudes appear rote and mechanical instead of contributing to a meaningful dialogue of healing. With the head commissioner doubting the authenticity of the Commission, its interconnected goals of seeking the truth and promoting collective healing become dismantled from within, and it becomes questionable as to what the purpose of the Commission's truth-finding might be if the "optics", or the way the event is publicly perceived, matter more than a genuine discussion of what healing should mean.

That Stanfield speaks the same words before every hearing points to the supposed universality of the proceedings: the hearings all follow an identical structure, during which witnesses are called and questioned before the Commission. To an extent, following such a script is necessary for the workings of the Commission, as much of its claim to authority lies in the repetition of its rules and phrasings. These rules function as what Derrida refers to as "the element of calculation" within the law, so that those who carry out the law know how to administer it (*Foi* 946). As Derrida explains in *Force de Loi*, without iterability, there would be no law, since the law is based on recognizing the

same circumstances recurring across multiple cases. For example, the Commission's language promises amnesty to any who truthfully admit to their past crimes as a means of encouraging members of paramilitary groups to participate in the process. However, the very repetition that makes the proceedings possible also exposes the disingenuousness of the Commission. As the novel's representation of the amnesty hearings indicates, many of the testimonies appear scripted and rehearsed. In one instance, Gilroy and his assistant, Sweeney, listen to a radio report of an amnesty hearing, which broadcasts the testimony of an IRA volunteer who killed an off-duty soldier. The text presents the confession as completely unoriginal:

> Both men chorus the words over the radio's voice. 'I was a soldier fighting in a war. At that time I believed the victim represented a legitimate target in that war. I deeply regret the pain and suffering caused to his family…'
>
> 'You'd think they could think up some variations just to make it sound spontaneous,' Gilroy says. (97)

The IRA volunteer's formulaic response is designed to ensure amnesty, and yet this depiction exposes the inauthenticity of the process. Much like Krog questioned whether the possibility of amnesty would lead to a productive confrontation with the truth, Park's novel reveals the displacement between the Commission's aims of seeking truth, reconciliation, and closure. Gilroy and Sweeney's ability to predict the perpetrator's words indicates the degree to which the amnesty hearings generate similar responses from its participants, apologies that appear more self-interested than as authentic statements of regret.

The novel's depiction of the amnesty hearings therefore expose a breach between political and personal acts of forgiveness. While amnesty is designed to foster societal reconciliation, granting public and official forgiveness can, at times, come at the expense of personal healing. In his writings on amnesty, Paul Ricoeur argues, "Amnesty is a constitutional power which should be used as infrequently as possible" because it constitutes "an institutionalized form of amnesia" (*Critique* 126). Although Ricoeur acknowledges that "amnesty contributes to the public tranquility that forms the responsibilities of the state", he argues that such tranquility comes at the cost of a sense of justice for the victims (126). As Ricoeur says in an interview with Sorin Anthohi, "Amnesty prevents both forgiveness and justice" (10). For Ricoeur, amnesty, as a political and organized act of forgetting, contrasts with personal forgiveness, in which the perpetrator is forgiven because of the generosity of the victim. Juxtaposed with the public, commanded injunction of amnesty, this type of pardon occurs on an individual level "as a personal act of compassion", one that the victim also has the right to refuse. Unlike amnesty, pardon cannot be mandated, so that the decision to forgive is therefore granted to the victim.

By portraying the hearings as scripted, *The Truth Commissioner* accentuates the discordance between amnesty, justice, and forgiveness. The lack of correlation between these concerns becomes especially evident in moments where the Commission's expected routines break down. In one hearing, after an elderly woman listens to a man confess to killing her husband, Stanfield asks her if she would like to address the perpetrator. When she rises, he is shocked to see "she has a knife in her hand – Stanfield can't be sure but thinks it's come from inside her Bible – and is lunging towards the killer of her husband"

(243). Ironically, before the stabbing Stanfield had been "grateful, at least, for the seemingly straightforward brevity of the case in progress" – grateful, that is, because the hearing seemed to be proceeding according to its script, including the perpetrator's requisite "admission of responsibility, an apology, and even a seemingly sincere little appeal for forgiveness" (242). The woman's violent response, however, disrupts the scripted aspects of the hearing, pointing to the inability of the perpetrator's confession to translate into her sense of justice or closure. During this instance, moreover, the public acknowledgement of the past reopens an unresolved history, inciting further violence rather than reinforcing the discourses of healing and reconciliation.

Although the law might depend on an element of calculability, *The Truth Commissioner* depicts hearings that resist the generality implied by the rule of law. As Derrida says in *Force of Law*, "justice requires the calculation of the incalculable" (946). The "incalculability" of justice refers to the singularity of individual cases, those which resist generalization and that are not exchangeable or replaceable with one another. The shocking, unpredictable instance of the stabbing by a most unassuming-looking subject provides a textual example of one such case, when the confession in exchange for amnesty appealed to the general rule but not to a specific sense of justice. Stanfield, moreover, acknowledges the resulting gap that appears between the generality of the law and the incalculability of justice when he observes the grieving families who attend the amnesty hearings:

> But there is no elegy played out in the increasingly elaborate rituals that grief has created, only a fractious, bitter stirring of the water to which people rush with earnest hope of healing. He has presided over some truth but little reconciliation

> and as each day goes by it becomes increasingly obvious that what the plaintiffs want is truth and the justice that they feel they've been denied. Stanfield comes to recognize it in their eyes, their need for the final assertion of some weighty moral imperative that will sweep the perpetrator to divine justice. Instead they get some formulaic, pre-learned response that expresses a vague regret for the pain caused and then presents the get-out-of-jail card that avoids personal guilt or moral culpability by stating that they believed they were fighting in a war. When it's all over, Stanfield sees, too, the void opening up inside the bereaved, when they understand that this is all they are to be given and they realise it's not enough. (246)

Stanfield's thoughts recall the novel's epigraph and its reference to the angel of Bethesda, only here, the stirring of the water results in frustrated disillusionment rather than in healing. "No elegy" is performed, Stanfield realizes; in other words, no sense of relief arises from the legal procedures intended to redress loss. Grief, it seems, cannot here be redressed, at least not by the mechanized routines of the hearings. While the perpetrator's testimony is intended to provide a truthful account of the past, the resulting narrative appears contrived and scripted. The most commonly cited reason for killing – that the perpetrator was "fighting in a war" – comes to function not an admission of guilt so much as an abdication of responsibility. Notably, this renunciation of responsibility is reinforced by the Commission itself, which accepts this particular "get-out-of-jail card"; the scripts that inform the Commission's process therefore authorize the granting of amnesty in exchange for a "pre-learned" testimony.

As scripts of healing come undone, the novel further suggests that although the Truth Commission's rhetoric is premised on disclosing the truth, not all truths are encouraged or desired. When Stanfield prepares to hold the hearing on Connor Walshe, he realizes that he and his team "have no absolute guarantees that the necessary answers will be forthcoming" (27). When one of his younger associates, Laura, asks, "'What can be gained now by withholding the truth?'", Stanfield has no reply, but "[f]or a second he thinks of trying to explain that the truth is rarely a case of what will be gained, so much as a case of what might be lost" (27). Exposing the truth is not presented as a generative or additive process but as a potential risk that could expose a void within the Commission's workings. In particular, divulging the truth about the past may destabilize the fragile political stability of the present. For instance, the hearing for Connor Walshe threatens to implicate Gilroy in the murder, a revelation that could undermine the new government. When Fenton, the former RUC officer, prepares to testify at the hearing, one of his colleagues tells him not to mention Gilroy's possible involvement in Connor's murder, explaining, "[I]t's got to do with protecting the institutions, safeguarding the future. With bringing people inside the system and making sure they stay there. Trying to build something better than we had in the past" (134-135). In this instance, the novel indicates that a purposeful suppression of the truth is part of what makes political reconciliation possible. Otherwise, the simultaneous goals included in the Commission's rhetoric – seeking the truth and laying the foundation for societal reconciliation – threaten to come into conflict with one another.

Through the case of Connor Walshe, *The Truth Commissioner* suggests that such a conflict might be inevitable nevertheless, as the Walshe family's demand for the

identification of Connor's murderer could militate against efforts towards political reconciliation. The novel, furthermore, implies that even if their plea for truth is met, a comprehensive sense of closure might not be achieved. When Fenton is told that he is being called before the Truth Commission because Connor's family "wants some form of closure", he responds angrily, "'We all know what happened to him…The IRA said he was a tout and shot him, then disposed of his body somewhere. How will that help them find closure? And what about my closure? When am I allowed to walk away and put it all behind me?'" (134). Fenton's outburst serves as a reminder that knowing what happened in the past does not necessarily lead to closure. Moreover, his words reveal an additional viewpoint on what it means to find closure: one individual's effort to resolve a painful experience can call forth another's past, and in Fenton's case, it is a past he would rather forget. *The Truth Commissioner* consequently provides competing narratives of what closure might mean; instead of a universal or homogenizing definition, a multiplicity of perspectives converges within the novel, with the personal often clashing with the collective.

Park's imagined Commission exposes a disjunction between the often competing desires of truth, justice, and reconciliation. As Chapter 1 discussed, Shoshana Felman argues in *The Juridical Unconscious* that legal cases dramatically enact the relation between trauma and the law, exposing a crisis at the core of the law itself. If Park's novel stages a crisis in the Northern Irish Truth Commission, it does so is by revealing an unbridgeable gap between the call for truth, the demand for justice, and the desire for reconciliation. Although the scripted aspects of the process attempt to fill in this gap, the disconnect between truth, justice, and reconciliation repeatedly interrupts the

proceedings, calling attention to the ways in which the Commission breaks down or fails to completely fulfill its aims. Even though the Commission's scripts – including a predetermined rhetoric of healing and a mechanized amnesty process – are intended to reinforce its aims, in effect such guidelines prevent a meaningful engagement with the past. As the novel indicates, the Commission is unable to master the unresolved and violent histories that emerge. Although legal justice cannot be done within the Commission itself, the novel leaves its cases uncomfortably open, subverting and undoing the attempt to find legal closure. *The Truth Commissioner*, in other words, reveals that the workings of the law are not always sufficient to remedy the wrongs of the past: some losses cannot be reclaimed or redressed.

III

The Truth Commissioner has thus far shown how the Commission's pre-established scripts break down, dismantling the rhetoric of healing upon which the process depends. Park's novel interrogates notions of recovery and repair in another crucial way as well: metaphors of illness and contagion pervade the text, undercutting the Commission's premise of healing. For instance, after presiding over several hearings, Stanfield becomes overwhelmed by his continued exposure to the victims' expressions of accumulated grief: "Each day as he sits in the chamber he feels himself imbibe some more of the toxins that seep from the buried corrosive and carcinogenic emotions that have been given permission to come to the surface. Sometimes he feels a tightness in his chest, senses shallower breathing and he worries about his health" (247). In the novel, the past is frequently presented as something to be feared and "buried", and the above

passage is one of many in *The Truth Commissioner* that describes the emergence of the past, whether through memories or the release of pent-up emotion, as infectious and diseased. Images of contagion function as the metaphorical expression of the past contaminating the present, evoking the anxiety that the violence of the past will recur indefinitely and uncontrollably. Park's depiction of disease, furthermore, links *The Truth Commissioner* to the categories of immunity and autoimmunity, categories that illustrate how the Commission's purpose is made vulnerable by the constant return of the past.

While the concepts of immunity and autoimmunity developed out of the biological sciences, they have taken root in literary and philosophical discourses that seek to explore the supposed divide between self and other. When the immune system functions as it should, it recognizes cells that belong to the body and attacks cells that do not, suggesting that immunity is structured by binaries between inside and outside, self and other. In autoimmune disorders, however, the body's immune system launches an aggressive attack on its own tissues and organs. Because of the way the body harms itself during an autoimmune response, Derrida views autoimmunity as a process that causes a self-contained organism to turn against its defenses in a "quasi-suicidal fashion" (Borradori 94). In *Voyous*, Derrida describes autoimmunity as the "strange illogical logic by which a living being can spontaneously destroy, in an autonomous fashion, the very thing within it that is supposed to protect it against the other, to immunize it against the aggressive intrusion of the other" (173). Italian philosopher Robert Esposito has developed a similar conception through his "immunity paradigm", in which he posits the autoimmune as the "excessive defense that ruinously turns on the same body that continues to activate and strengthen it", as a "syndrome so out of control that it not only

destroys everything that it comes into contact with, but turns disastrously on its own body" (148, 165). Since the body's immune system is no longer able to successfully differentiate between its own defense mechanisms and outside foreign contaminants, Derrida has said that as the body turns on itself, it "must then come to resemble [its] enemies, to corrupt itself and threaten itself in order to protect itself against their threats" (*Voyous* 65). This process of self-annihilation leads Derrida to assert that autoimmunity thus "act[s] as a third term between the classical opposition between friend and foe" (*Autoimmunity* 152). In the context of *The Truth Commissioner*, the concept of autoimmunity offers a way of reading the novel's many metaphors of illness and infection as representative moments when supposedly self-contained structures begin to collapse. Throughout the text, the figure of autoimmunity appears in multiple forms. At times, it exposes the slippage between notions of self and other, particularly when the novel reveals the collapse of traditional republican and loyalist divisions. In addition, the novel eventually shows how the Truth Commission dismantles itself from within, when the very legal structures upon which it depends undermines its scripted references to reconciliation and healing.

The novel's references to disease and highlight the fear of a figurative contagion: the threat that the past will resurface to invade the present. In the imaginary world of the Truth Commission, the past insistently returns, suffusing the novel with a sense of unease and discomfort. Even though peace has been declared, the potential for violence to erupt once more produces a persistent low level of anxiety. Gilroy, for instance, never feels quite safe in his public role of Minister of Children and Culture, and although he surrounds himself with bodyguards, he expresses concern that he could be killed: "there

still lingers the permanent possibility of a hit… some unknown relative of a forgotten victim who has never forgotten, the memory eating away like a cancer until they have to staunch the pain" (69). Despite Gilroy's efforts to protect himself, he nevertheless realizes he could be harmed by someone driven by memories of the past, memories that are as tormenting and consuming as an illness. Memory, here, is conceived as cancerous, spreading feelings of loss until additional rounds of violence are perpetuated as acts of vengeance. As Gilroy indicates, however, the cause of this cancerous, pernicious memory is rooted in his own previous actions, specifically the killings he ordered as a leader in the IRA. The possible danger to his safety is therefore a product of his past, which threatens to reemerge to destroy his present life.

The past, then, appears intrusive and unavoidable, and the suggestion that actions from the past will contaminate or ruin the present runs throughout *The Truth Commissioner*. For example, former IRA volunteer Michael has left Ireland for the United States, and in an effort to leave his previous identity behind, he has broken off contact with his family and is living under the false name of Danny. These actions indicate his desire for a clean break from his former life, a desire that is reinforced by his understanding of the past as a "closed box" full of memories that "he's been so careful to stow away" (228). Fragments from the past, however, continually intrude to disrupt the peaceful life he hopes to have. Michael's community in the United States includes other Irish immigrants, who implicitly remind him of the difficulty of breaking with the past. During a weekly basketball game with his co-workers, Michael plays opposite another Irishman named Eamon O'Sullivan, who begins arguing with one of Michael's American

teammates. When Michael intervenes in support of his teammate, the following tense exchange occurs between O'Sullivan and Michael:

> 'Never side against your own. You remember that'.
>
> 'What the hell you talking about, Eamon? Edward is my own – in case you hadn't noticed we play on the same team.' (196)

O'Sullivan's words are indicative of the Troubles mentality Michael has tried to leave behind, in which preset conceptions of loyalty and identification define personal interactions. Michael, however, continues to encounter this mentality in the U.S., where he is expected to remain with his "own" even though they are no longer in Ireland. Accordingly, *The Truth Commissioner* is suggestive of the degree to which old modes of thinking continue to inform post-Agreement frameworks for understanding community and kinship. Michael's response to O'Sullivan – that his teammate, Edward, is his "own" – illustrates Michael's desire to formulate other markers of identification in an attempt to distance himself from this divisive mindset. The very emphasis on siding with one's own likewise elicits a structure of immunity, generating a sense of drawing together, of seeking refuge against an outside threat. It is a protective gesture that distinguishes between self and other in potentially violent and harmful ways.

In *The Truth Commissioner*, efforts to master or suppress the past are portrayed as unsuccessful, and whenever the past begins to resurface, it does so through insistent analogies to the spread of disease or toxins. Although Michael has attempted to bury his past, he momentarily wonders if he should confess before a priest after he becomes engaged to a woman to whom he has not revealed his true identity, since "a wedding is the biggest new start in life and making a confession might carry him across that line

clean and ready to build the future" (209). By viewing confession as an act of cleansing, Michael associates the active acknowledgement of the past with the effort to construct a safe and assured future, as though confessing would grant him the break from his past he so desires. Ultimately, however, Michael cannot bring himself to confess before the priest, and he fears his fiancée's reaction if she ever divulged the truth. After his failed attempt, he wonders:

> [H]ow could he, even for a moment, have thought of letting loose the spores of the past, of casting them to the wind with no way to predict or control where they would land?
>
> He thinks of the anthrax scare, of envelopes seeping with white powder. Of contamination…. So why even in this place should he let these tainted seed heads blow through his mind and infect the future? (228-229)

The novel presents the past as overwhelmingly contagious, and in Michael's view, the act of openly confessing would resuscitate a past he has tried to bury, lending it a renewed force he could not command. While Michael has tried to establish a home in a new place that will inure him from his past, he senses an underlying vulnerability within this home; he is never quite safe or secure from the perils of his former life. The text consequently reveals a fear that the past could unexpectedly return to occlude any chance of a peaceful or stable present.

The Truth Commissioner suggests there is no immunity to the past, only a constant exposure to the risk it contains. Despite the new identity Michael has assumed, he is incapable of fully suppressing his past; eventually, two men from the IRA Council locate him and deliver a summons to testify before the Truth Commission. Like anthrax,

the summons is delivered in an envelope and carries a similar hazard: Michael "doesn't want to touch it" and fears that if he does, "everything will explode in his face" (235). In many ways, the summons does cause his life as he knows it to implode: his fiancée ends their engagement when she finds out he has assumed a false identity, and Michael leaves the U.S. to return to Ireland. Ironically, the very thing Michael fears above all else – the public return of his past – is brought about by the people who are supposedly his "own". Michael's largest threat comes from within a group to which he belonged, and in a logic similar to that of the autoimmune, his community turns on him, dissolving the distinction between the self-protective promise implied by his "own" and the harmful, outside world. Indeed, the outside world never presented as much of a danger to Michael as his Northern Irish counterparts, who demand that he admit to killing Connor in order to protect Gilroy from possible suspicion. As Michael considers how his confession will impact his life with his fiancée, "he knows as much as it's possible to know anything, that if he says these words he's finished without a single hope and that whatever piece of absolving paper they give him, he's destroyed for certain whatever future they still might have" (336). By commanding Michael to take the blame for a murder he did not commit, the IRA Council not only asks him to perjure himself but also to perform a kind of suicide, in which he sacrifices his future for the sake of reinforcing the patterns and mentalities of his former life.

While *The Truth Commissioner* frequently describes the return of the past as infectious, it is through the description of the specific case of Connor Walshe that the novel reveals the underlying vulnerability of its imagined Commission. Before the hearing for Connor even commences, memories and flashbacks of the boy are

characterized by images of sickness and disease. As a police informant, Connor occupied an uncomfortable position between the IRA and RUC while he lived, not fully belonging to either one. As such, he is eventually perceived by both groups as an outside threat, as though he has been blighted by his contact with the other. For instance, as Fenton readies himself to testify at Connor's hearing, he remembers the moment when he decided to no longer employ Connor as a police informant, and his recollection suggests that even at that time, Connor seemed polluted and unsafe: "The boy is beginning to smell. Fenton isn't sure if it's real or the product of his imagination. It's not the familiar sickly tang of sweat, or the smell of unchanged clothes, or even feet too long encased in the same trainers, but something else, something that seems to seep from his pores and infect the air around him…Perhaps it's time to move on, to cut the losses" (151). Fenton eventually perceives Connor as a danger, a potential risk to his operation, and seeks to distance himself from Connor before he becomes tainted by the strange contaminant the boy appears to harbor. Like Fenton, the IRA members who abduct Connor view him as uncontainably infectious. Riding in the car with his abductors, Connor "shivers suddenly and one of the men squirms away from him as if frightened of contracting some contagious disease" (2). Connor's own fear and sense of displacement is described as contagious, and the IRA volunteers seem concerned that close contact with someone who has been labeled a police informant will somehow lead them to harm as well.

In addition, each group attempts to employ Connor to further their own schemes, though Connor unwittingly disrupts their agendas. Fenton tells Connor, "'You know what we want, the names we're interested in, the houses, the cars'", but Connor cannot deliver the information Fenton requires (152). Part of Fenton's issue with Connor therefore stems

from Connor's inability to reinforce his pre-conceived narrative. The IRA likewise seeks to use Connor to further its anti-police agenda; the novel later reveals that his abductors never intended to kill him but instead sought information against the RUC, first creating a tape recording of Connor's account of his meetings with Fenton and then planning to hold a press conference where Connor would describe how he had been recruited by the policeman (335). In other words, the IRA constructs a type of script for Connor to follow in an effort to contain the situation, one which oddly parallels the structure of the Truth Commission hearings that will be instituted later. By offering to release Connor if he discloses the truth of his meetings with Fenton, the IRA grants him a kind of amnesty. The plan, however, goes awry; though Connor attests to his meetings with Fenton, he is killed when he attempts to escape. The novel's descriptions of Connor as contagious underscore the inability of either Fenton or the IRA to fully control the circumstances surrounding his role as an informant or use him to support the scripts they hoped to maintain, and in these instances, suggestions of disease undermine the authority of both group's pre-established agendas.

Depicting Connor as the carrier of an infectious disease also prefigures the unsettling extent to which his case will later come to jeopardize the stability of the Truth Commission. Even before the hearing begins, Stanfield detects an ominous undercurrent to the case. As he reaches for Connor's file to prepare for the hearing, "[p]art of him feels repelled by what he has to touch, worried by what viral strains and spores might linger in the bruised patina of the pages, and he wonders, in private at least, if he should wear gloves" (28). Given the novel's presentation of the past as virulent and uncontained, the text suggests that the events surrounding Connor's death will resurface in dangerous and

unexpected ways. Although the hearing is designed to provide closure for Connor's family, who tell Stanfield they seek the location of Connor's body "so [they] can bury him" and "put him to rest", the novel's skeptical outlook on discourses of healing and closure places doubt on the hearing's potential to deliver redemption or restoration. In an implicit contrast to the angel of the novel's epigraph, Connor's sister Maria states in her deposition that Connor was "not an angel", suggesting the waters his memory disturbs will produce no lasting sense of healing (318).

The hearing for Connor provides a pivotal moment in the novel, in which the past emerges more inescapably and infectiously than in any other scene. It is only during the hearing that the four major characters begin to come together: Stanfield presides over the proceedings while Fenton and Michael appear to testify, and Gilroy alone is absent. Yet Gilroy finds himself immersed in thoughts of Connor as the hearing occurs, remembering the moment of Conner's death, in which he and a colleague from the IRA, Rafferty, organize a search for Connor after he escapes:

> Dark night sky and cold so that when they ran their breath streamed in front of them and Rafferty calling to get torches and splitting and running in blind circles and pausing to listen and listen and then it's Rafferty's voice and he's in the orchard behind the house and then there's a gunshot, please God no but it's a gunshot, and the torchlight shows the gun in his hand. And the boy is sprawled on the ground with a bullet wound in his head and twigs and rotten apples round it and Rafferty is standing looking down at him and whatever was inside him has drained away and he doesn't say anything and so he gives him the gun without saying anything or resisting and for a second he wants to shoot the bloody fool

> but as the others arrive he takes control and tells them to get the black plastic out of the barn they use for baling and cord and wrap the boy in it. (343)

From Gilroy's perspective, the truth behind the identity of Connor's killer is left undecided; if anything, the ambiguous repetition of the pronouns "he" and "him" gives a slight suggestion that it was Rafferty, and not Gilroy, who committed the murder. What is more, Gilroy's recollection reveals the extent to which the past intrudes onto the present moment; the paratactic effect of his thoughts contributes to the immediacy of the memory, which carries the affective impact of Connor's death into the present. As this passage shows, *The Truth Commissioner* is written entirely in the present tense, even when it describes a memory or flashback; the novel's formal structure therefore provides no concrete separation between past and present, but blurs the distinction between the two. The text thus establishes a perpetual, inexorable sense of the past *as* present, as constantly being relived and re-experienced.

During the hearing itself, the many images and memories of Connor converge to challenge the Commission's established scripts and protocols. Stanfield, who had planned to resign from his post as head commissioner after Connor's hearing, reflects as the proceedings begin, "Outwardly everything appears as normal and he tries to reassure himself that in this, the final case he'll preside over, everything will go according to the script and it can be brought to a speedy and satisfactory conclusion" (316). The novel, however, creates moments of heightened suspense by introducing unexpected pieces of evidence into the hearing, which disrupt any notion that the case will proceed as planned. The first of these moments occurs when the counsel for Connor's family produce the tape-recording of his interrogation, a move that breaks the predetermined protocols of the

Commission and causes Stanfield to momentarily interrupt the hearing to ask the Walshe family's lawyer if the tape is "of legitimate concern" to the case (326). When the tape is played, Connor's voice materializes across time to inflect the courtroom's present moment:

> The voice beats against the walls of the chamber like some moth trapped in a tremble of confusion and looking for release. Stanfield looks down on the listeners and sees their eyes drop to the floor as a kind of collective embarrassed shame settles on the room because they know they're listening to the voice of a boy who's about to die and they know that their presence intrudes even all these years later and that their places should be taken by a priest or his family, someone, anyone, who will put a hand on his shoulder and tell him that everything will be alright. They want the tape to stop. (328)

As Tom Herron points out, the disembodied voice is reminiscent of Susan Sontag's discussion of the photograph as "'a trace" of the real, "something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask…a photograph is never less than the registering of an emanation (light waves reflected by objects) – a material vestige of its subject'" (qtd. in Herron 27). While the tape exposes the hearing's participants to the spectral quality of Connor's voice, Herron asserts that "at this moment, there is also the shocking and almost unbearable intrusion of the 'real'". More specifically, it is the past that is perceived as real and existing in the present. The material sound of Connor's voice inspires a strong affective response in the listeners, compelling them to feel as though Connor is physically present in that moment and allowing them to imagine that someone could even touch him. In this instance, in which the normal procedures of the hearing are

interrupted, the past is experienced with an unexpected urgency, reinvigorated in a markedly tangible way.

Through its disruption of the Commission's normal protocol, the tape generates a seemingly uncontrollable momentum that steers the hearing away from its pre-established script. Before the hearing, Michael's fellow IRA members coach him on what to say, specifically instructing him to confess to killing Connor in an effort to deflect attention away from Gilroy's complicity in the murder. Michael's testimony is therefore scripted for him, following the IRA's conspiratorial code, leaving Michael feeling as though he is no more than "an actor delivering someone else's lines" (333). However, when the tape is played and Connor's voice echoes through the chamber, it "laps round Michael Madden like the water laps and slurps round the jetty at the lake" by his former home (327). Once again, the novel presents an image of troubled waters, though in this instance, the image is for the first time linked to a desire to find resolution. As Michael takes the stand, "He's angry that they used him and he's angry that they're still using him now. He looks at Connor's mother and sister, sees their sad scrutiny of him and feels the intensity of their gaze, and he thinks of how long they've waited for the truth. Then he glances round the room at all the other faces starting at him and knows this is finally and inescapably the time and the place" (336-337). At this crucial moment, the novel turns away from the course set by Michael's originally scripted testimony, as he decides to break from the narrative the IRA constructed for him. Instead, the voice of Connor and the appearance of his family compel Michael to speak the truth as he sees it, and he does not confess to the murder. In a suspenseful turn, moreover, the novel depicts the most shocking moment of Michael's testimony after it officially concludes; as he leaves the witness stand, Maria

stops Michael to ask him to identify Connor's murderer. Their exchange represents another instance in which the Commission's protocol is broken and its authority is challenged, as Maria, classified by the Commission's language as a "victim", is not supposed to address the witness unless Stanfield allows it. In this additional moment of interruption, Michael incriminates Gilroy in Connor's death.

In a logic similar to the autoimmune, the Truth Commission dissolves from within, undone by the very structures designed to uphold its integrity. The hearing for Connor Walshe is disrupted by two internal components upon which the Commission relies in order to function: evidence, presented by the tape recording, and testimony, given by Michael Madden. Significantly, neither component was expected or anticipated, and because of their surprising interruptions of the hearing, both dismantle the Commission's established script. As the hearing ends, Stanfield reflects: "The best-laid schemes. There's nothing he can do now, it's out of his control" (345). By recognizing his loss of control over the proceedings, Stanfield tacitly acknowledges the final and irrevocable breakdown of the hearing's script, of the trajectory he had assumed it would take. In addition, Michael's incrimination of Gilroy reinforces the autoimmune structure of this breakdown. Considering Michael's testimony, Stanfield thinks, "He was powerless in the face of the outburst, as shocked as anyone – not by the claim but by the fact that it found a voice from the same side" (359). Similarly, when Gilroy learns that Michael has implicated him, he says, "'It's all over when you're not sure if you've been screwed by one of your own or the Brits'" (348). Once again, divisions between self and other crumble, as the threat to Gilroy comes from inside his own organization, challenging old constructions of loyalty.

In *The Truth Commissioner*, Park reveals how the Commission, in the very act of attempting to fortify itself as a predictable and protected script, opens itself up to the possibility of corruption and failure. Park's imagined truth commission is threatened internally by its most significant component: testimony. Michael's unpredictable and surprising testimony eventually interrupts the script and knocks it off its course, leaving the process of truth recovery – and by extension, the possibility of social reconciliation – in uncertainty. And yet, the autoimmune structure of the Commission does not have to be strictly ruinous; as Derrida notes, "[A]utoimmunity is not absolute ill or evil. It permits an exposure to the other, to *what* and to *who* comes – and therefore it must remain incalculable. Without autoimmunity, with absolute immunity, nothing more would ever happen or arrive. We would no longer wait, we would no longer expect, no longer expect one another, or any event" (*Voyous* 210). Although the unexpected testimony ends the novel in a state of confusion, the autoimmune structure of the commission creates a space for the incalculable, for a genuine testimony that contrasts with the mechanical testimonies that came before.

In a novel full of disingenuous and skeptical overtones, Michael's testimony is as close to a redemptive moment as the text allows. This moment has led some critics to read the novel's conclusion as tentatively optimistic; Tom Herron asserts that ultimately, Park's imagined Truth Commission offers "a cautiously optative disposition towards such valiant truth-finding attempts, no matter how flawed or compromised they may appear to be" (29). Shareem Black, meanwhile, views Stanfield as representative of the novel's "optimism", since he decides not to resign after all, an action that Black says indicates "his final commitment to a process of disclosure that will never be complete" (63). These

affirmations of the text's potentially optimistic conclusion are not without merit, though perhaps too quickly applied. *The Truth Commissioner* ends on an ambiguous note, refusing to fully assure its readers that such optimism is warranted. For instance, although Michael identifies Gilroy as Connor's murderer, the novel has already made it clear that Gilroy possibly did *not* commit the crime, suggesting that what is true for Michael cannot necessarily be taken for the full or empirical truth. Yet again, the text undermines the Commission's aim of uncovering the truth, and by implicating Gilroy, Michael's testimony endangers the country's political stability.

Arguably, *The Truth Commissioner's* greatest suspense comes not from its courtroom drama but from how it persistently holds any expectation of optimism in abeyance. Whenever the novel indicates that the truth is about to become unveiled, it turns against this assumption before any final sense of closure may be definitively confirmed. In many ways, the novel's concluding pages are characterized by a significant lack of resolution. While the Walshe family finally receives an account of the last moments of Connor's life through Michael's testimony, the novel has already destabilized Michael as a source of objective truth or knowledge. Although Michael gives the Commission the location of Connor's body, the novel ends with only the suggestion of a body and not the body itself. Excavators arrive at the side of an isolated bog, but the novel concludes before the digging begins, offering its readers no decisive proof that Connor's body is ever found; the text withholds this final measure of resolution (372).

Even though the novel presents a moment of genuine, unpredictable and unscripted testimony, it refuses to condense this moment into a fully revelatory or

redemptive truth. Following the hearing, it becomes evident that Michael feels no true sense of relief or closure from speaking his testimony:

> He should feel lighter having cast off this thing that's festered inside his head for so long but instead there's only a sense of shame that the world knows what he's held so carefully in secret…it feels as if he's been branded with it for all to recognise. And it suddenly strikes him that there'll be no casting off, no simple putting behind him, that what he said will journey with him wherever he goes, and all he's done is allowed it to emerge whole and completely formed into the light. (351)

By giving his testimony, Michael has irrevocably called forth the very past that he has been attempting to suppress, yet he now finds that publicly acknowledging his past has only caused it to follow him incessantly rather than reassuringly recede. Fearing the IRA's retribution for his betrayal, Michael flees the text into the unknown, leaving Northern Ireland for "the first flight out the place to which he knows he'll never return" (354). Michael's experience goes against one of the primary purposes of the Commission as a transitional justice mechanism; according to Ruti Teitel, a truth commission's efforts to establish a cohesive social narrative should reinforce for its country's inhabitants a feeling of moving from "exile to home, the true, natural state" (114). That is, the testimonies spoken before a truth commission work to reinvent the nation as a "true" and "natural" place in which its inhabitants can live a fully political life. However, with Michael unable to return the United States and with his testimony resulting in his exile from Ireland, *The Truth Commissioner* denies him this perception of homecoming.

The novel's final pages suggest that Northern Ireland has not yet escaped its legacy of violence, despite the efforts of the Commission to achieve collective healing. In another unresolved mystery, unknown arsonists set fire to the estate housing the Commission's records. Since the records have been scanned and saved on hard drives, the fire appears symbolically rather than literally destructive, pointing to the implosion of the Commission's tenuous attempts at truth-recovery and reconciliation. As Stanfield and his younger colleague, Matteo, watch the building burn, Stanfield thinks of Matteo, "For all his knowledge, how very little he really knows about the world, how little he understands that sometimes the angel troubling the water might only darken the swirling pool of the past. There'll be an inquiry of course and for the rest of their bitter, corrosive history each side will blame the other and each year a new and blossoming conspiracy theory will apportion blame" (369). Once again, the novel explicitly undermines the discourses of healing established in its epigraph, as Stanfield recognizes that disturbing the waters is not likely to produce any grand sense of healing. Instead, Stanfield's thoughts reposition the Commission's workings as belonging to an older pattern of blame and division, the very pattern the Commission has endeavored to dispel. As David Miller says, the persistent mentality of blame results in "the playing out of historical wrongs as if [the conflict] had been frozen in historical stasis" (6). At its ending, the novel implies that the past cannot be disentangled from the present, indicating that history is never closed or final.

The Truth Commissioner thus concludes with the unanswered question of how it should be read, as either a text that offers a possible suggestion of restoration, however slight, or as one that takes a skeptical stance of Northern Ireland's capacity for collective

healing. Despite the friction that exists between these two points of view, the tension the novel generates is not necessarily unproductive. Although *The Truth Commissioner* rather frustratingly refuses to grant any firm indication of resolution, this ambiguity is perhaps central to the novel, suggestive of why it is possible to read the conclusion as both optimistic and cynical. Since the novel addresses a moment in time soon after the Belfast Agreement was signed, it gestures towards the as-yet-unknown future. *The Truth Commissioner* reflects the uncertain climate of that time, articulating the inability to know whether the peace process will be effective in restoring the country or if it will end bitterly in more violence. The idea of the future contains as much risk as the past; as David Lloyd maintains, Northern Ireland is haunted by two types of specters: "the more familiar ghost that rises from destruction" as well as "the phantom of 'future possibility'" (22). Just as the past may disruptively invade the present, the present may also be haunted by the undetermined future.

If the past always returns as a plague on the present, it threatens to close off any possibility of a future that might be imagined differently, one that could allow for restoration instead of violence. At the same time, for the future to be open to the possibility of reconciliation, it must also be exposed to the danger of renewed hostilities. The future is as such unknowable; as Derrida says in *Politics of Friendship*, "What would a future be if the decision were able to be programmed, and if the risk [*l'aléa*], the uncertainty, the unstable certainty, the inassurance of the 'perhaps', were not suspended on it at the opening of what comes, flush with the event, within it and with an open heart?" (29). Derrida distinguishes between the future in the usual sense of the word, referring to events that are likely to happen, and what he calls the future "to come" ["*l'à-*

venir"], a future which is not merely defined as the deployment of current possibilities, but which remains unforeseeable and unpredictable. The future to come exists beyond the known future, and its arrival heralds in an event that cannot be determined in advance.[50] In its radical otherness, this future could usher in changes that are an improvement compared to the present, but these changes could also be worse: there is no way to know beforehand.

In other words, there is no future without risk. Park's *The Truth Commissioner* undoubtedly presents a troubled, risky process, which appears to crumble from the moment of its initiation. And yet risk might be necessary to shift away from the confining patterns of the past. The novel reveals the dangers involved in living perpetually in the past through its representations of characters who are too enmeshed in their personal histories to move forward. By disassembling scripted and mechanical discourses of healing, *The Truth Commissioner* further suggests that the usual expressions of closure and repair are not sufficient to genuinely engage with Troubles remembrance. While the novel does not explicitly resolve these concerns, it indicates that new idioms might be necessary for adopting a different mentality, for establishing a non-cyclical relationship to the past. Any effort to move beyond the existing pull of the past, even if this effort is flawed, seeks to imagine another future. Although this endeavor contains the potential to expose memories that incite uncertainty and violence, perhaps it also creates a space in which to remember otherwise, opening up an unknown future that is, for all its fraughtness, finally a possibility.

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[50] As discussed in Chapter 1, Derrida characterizes an event, in the strongest sense of the word, as utterly unforeseen, coming as a complete surprise and dismantling any effort to fully comprehend its significance.

4

"Some Blessed Hope":

Elegiac Inheritance in the Works of

Ingrid de Kok and Sally-Ann Murray

I

In "The Darkling Thrush", a poem dated December 31, 1899, Thomas Hardy elegizes the dying nineteenth century, depicting a bleak midwinter landscape which represents, for him, the "Century's corpse outleant" (10). In the midst of this desolate scene, a thrush pours forth an ecstatic caroling, prompting the poem's speaker to wonder if, despite his despondent surroundings, "some blessed Hope" might still be found "written on terrestrial things" (27, 31). Over one hundred years later, South African poet Ingrid de Kok takes up this question in her collection *Terrestrial Things* (2002), which takes its title directly from Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush". Writing from another time and place, de Kok is captured by Hardy's image of a songbird representing a flighty, possibly unattainable hope as, on the cusp of the twenty-first century, she looks back upon the violence of South African apartheid. In *Terrestrial Things*, de Kok draws on Hardy's imagery to contemplate her country's uncertain future and explore the difficulty of finding hope amidst a time of grief and loss.

In referencing Hardy, de Kok positions herself as part of a long poetic tradition. She finds inspiration not only in Hardy, but also in W.B. Yeats; her poem "Too Long A Sacrifice" evokes Yeats's political elegy "Easter 1916" for the members of the Irish Easter Rising. Like Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush", Yeats's poem appears to reach far

beyond the scope of its present moment, speaking to conflicts in other times and places. De Kok's contemporary, Sally-Ann Murray, also references "Easter 1916" in her poem "Easter 1989", written for South African hunger-striker Sandile Thusi. In confronting the challenges of making sense of apartheid, de Kok and Murray turn to their lyrical predecessors, producing a literary nexus between poets and the events of which they write. Both South African poets have explicitly acknowledged the influence of poetic traditions on their work: de Kok composed her Master's thesis on Hardy, while Murray, an English professor at the University of Natal, was teaching Yeats's poetry during the time of Sandil Thusi's hunger strike.[51]

Neither poet, however, embraces this tradition – which emerges most directly from Western, European conventions – comfortably or uncritically. Their writings also emerge from the complex and interconnected histories of colonialism and apartheid, histories which keep de Kok and Murray on the periphery of the Western literary tradition. Although they sometimes borrow or refer to this tradition, in other instances they mark their distance from dominant or canonical forms, genres, and themes, composing a type of poetry that instead responds to a specifically South African context. Much of their work attempts to remember those who would otherwise go unremembered, the casualties of apartheid who typically have not been the subjects of Western literature. To address the violence of apartheid, de Kok and Murray politicize the elegy, a form that, in its traditional definition, comes to terms with grief through a lyrical performance of the

[51] De Kok mentions her Masters's thesis in an interview with Erica Kelly. See "Strangely Tender: An Interview with Ingrid de Kok." By Erica Kelly. *scrunity2: Issues in English Studies in South Africa* 8.1 (2003): 34-38. Murray discusses teaching Yeats in a conversation with Michelle McGrane. See "Michells McGrane in Conversation with Sally-Ann Murray", *LitNet-argief* Feb. 2007, https://argief.litnet.co.za.

mourning process. In their re-articulations of the elegy, however, de Kok and Murray engage with the form differently, writing poems that do not seek to heal but that instead intensify feelings of loss, uncertainty, and incomprehension. The purpose of their elegies, which resist mourning and closure, is not to become caught in a perpetual cycle of despair, but instead carries out many functions: their resistant elegies work to forestall cultural amnesia, to memorialize those who would otherwise remain unacknowledged, and to recognize that sometimes suffering is not easily resolved by public processes of reconciliation such as the TRC. In other words, de Kok and Murray present a form of elegy that does not do the work of mourning so much as it does the work of memory. Performing the work of memory does not necessarily mean that the past is being accurately or factually reconstructed – indeed, in the experience of trauma, a full reconstruction may not be possible – but rather asks how historical trauma and political turbulence impact the ways in which South Africa's past will be remembered.

De Kok and Murray thus compose elegies that simultaneously bind them to the literary traditions from which they write and mark their distance from these traditions. As they inherit Western literary genres, such as the lyric and the elegy, they perform a complicated maneuver in which they receive, repurpose, and sometimes reject canonical forms. In this maneuvering, their poetry, which has a transnational connection to literatures of other times and places, draws attention to the enduring inequalities and racial exclusions held over from colonial history even as it unsettles this history from within. Archival histories of print – such as Peter Kalliney's *Commonwealth of Letters* – reveal how transnational networks of publication have influenced the development of literary forms. According to Kalliney, British modernists "actively recruited late colonial

and postcolonial intellectuals" as collaborators in order to revive mid-century cultural institutions and to extend Anglo-modernist techniques of alienation, fragmentation, irony, and allusion (4). For instance, Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o reinvented the methodologies espoused by British literary critic F.R. Leavis, including practices of "close reading" and the idea of literature as "a living language", to reorient postcolonial communities through their emphasis on "racial and cultural difference" (115). Many modernist precepts have been employed to unmask the imperial underpinnings and exclusions of "English" literature, particularly as what constitutes a body of literature written in English has broadened in scope to include colonial and postcolonial cultures. At the same time, adapting Western literary forms in non-Western contexts is not unproblematic, as extending modes of writing that belong to the Western canon risks perpetuating unequal colonial power structures and ideologies in the literary sphere. Despite this risk, many contemporary authors – including de Kok and Murray – continue to respond to canonical texts and forms, treating them as versatile aesthetic resources. Through the renovation of conventional forms, contemporary authors account for both continuities and discontinuities within overlapping contexts of writing, engaging with literary models that speak to the aesthetic and political complexities of their current cultures.

As literary forms are inherited and reinvigorated, they become open to new iterations, potentially altering the ways texts are read, reread, and rewritten over time. A literary inheritance, then, is not necessarily a straightforward assimilation of previous forms but also interrogates the authority of those forms. In his discussions of inheritance, Derrida calls into question any self-given or univocal qualities attributed to a legacy,

describing the structure of inheritance as constituted by its "radical and necessary *heterogeneity*" (*Specters* 16). As Derrida says, "An inheritance is never gathered together, it is never one with itself" (16). The presumed unity or coherence of an inheritance occurs retroactively, "to maintain together that which does not hold together" (18). The "task of inheriting", as Derrida calls it, requires responding to "a double injunction" by moving between two apparently contradictory poles of necessity and agency, of receiving and reaffirming the inheritance (*For What* 3). According to the first injunction, one receives a past by being beholden to a heritage whose heterogeneity exceeds mastery, and yet for Derrida, there is a necessary responsibility to make something of the inheritance. This necessity leads to a second injunction, in which one must "*reaffirm by choosing*", or as Derrida further states:

> "'One must' [il faut] means *one must* filter, sift, criticize, one must sort out several different possibles/possibilities that inhabit the same injunction. And inhabit it in a contradictory fashion around a secret. If the readability of a legacy were given, natural, transparent, univocal, if it did not call for and at the same time defy interpretation, we would never have anything to inherit from it. We would be affected by it as by a cause – natural or genetic. One always inherits from a secret – which says 'read me, will you ever be able to do so?'" (*Specters* 16)

Inheritance, in this formulation, is not merely passed down or passively assimilated, but requires a thorough determination of what, exactly, should be inherited. In order to reaffirm the inheritance, or even only parts of it, a choice must be made to continue the legacy, and yet the choice to keep or discard the inheritance is not always clear or

straightforward. As with the challenges Bowen, West, and Krog face in their efforts to make sense of the past, the issue of readability – or more precisely unreadability – surfaces once again, this time through the attempt to weigh and analyze a possibly illegible inheritance. The process of understanding a legacy, of knowing what to take from it and what to leave behind, cannot be guaranteed.

By working within the double injunction of receiving and reaffirming, Derrida suggests an uncertain and divided form of agency or subjecthood. According to Derrida, a proper relation to inheritances "means simply not accepting this heritage but re-launching it otherwise and keeping it alive", even if it is betrayed or altered in the process. For instance, Derrida describes Nelson Mandela as a "true inheritor" of Western, European models of democracy. Mandela, in Derrida's view, is not positioned as "one who conserves and reproduces" Western traditions, but as "one who respects the *logic* of the legacy even to the point of turning it on occasion against those who claim to be its guardians, to the point of revealing, against the usurpers, what has never been seen in the inheritance: the point of giving birth, by the unheard-of *act* of a reflection, to what had never seen the light of day" (*Psyché II* 72). In other words, through sustaining the double injunction, the inheritor – in this context, Mandela – can inhabit the contradictions of an inheritance in ways that "relaunch it otherwise", moving it forward and transforming it into something new, and that carry the acknowledgement that this re-launching is partial, always calling for more. Inheritances "call for more" because, as finite subjects, our choices are necessarily limited before a fully inassimilable or knowable past. The inheritor comes belatedly, after many others who have come before and with the awareness that there are others who will come after. Moreover, the elements of the

heritage that are selected and passed on may re-inflict the very historical violence that one would hope to counteract (*For What* 4).

With this in mind, literary inheritance becomes a "critical task", in Derrida's phrase, for exploring the challenges and opportunities of reading the elegy in a transnational frame and examining how innovations in the genre conduct social commentary and critique. As the elegy has been re-imagined over time, it has moved away from a form that seeks to overcome grief and loss to encompass a stubborn refusal let go of the past. Peter Sack's foundational psychoanalytic study of elegy centers the genre on Freud's theories of mourning and melancholia, in which the bereaved undergoes the "work of mourning" in order to achieve "healthy" mourning and healing, as opposed to the pathological condition of melancholia wherein the sufferer cannot move on from grief. The successful work of mourning begins with a recognition that "the loved object no longer exists" and which then leads to the bereaved withdrawing from his or her attachments to that object. Mourning is thus characterized as work because the bereaved must detach from "each single one of the memories and expectations" bound up with the lost object. Freud goes on to say that "when the work of mourning is completed the ego is free and uninhibited again" (253). In melancholia, however, the bereaved individual does not undergo a process of detachment but unconsciously identifies with what has been lost and is therefore unable to reconcile that loss (258). Sacks notes that elegy traditionally forces the speaker to leave the dead, thereby engaging with Freud's work of successful mourning. Instead of searching for the object of loss, the elegist turns away toward a consoling substitute, which may be the poem itself. Sacks describes this action through what he calls the "familiar tasks" of elegies: "proving the reality of loss, confronting guilt

and anger, recollecting and then severing attachments to the dead, establishing substitutive figures for the lost object of love, curbing the mourner's desires by an act of self-purification that both redefines and reinforces his continuing identity" (235). Through this process of redefinition, the speaker creates a self more removed from bereavement.

More recently, however, critics have questioned the ability of the elegy to console and compensate for loss. Jahan Ramazani asserts that "modern elegists tend to enact the work not of normative but of 'melancholic' mourning", a term he adapts from Freud "to distinguish mourning that is unresolved, violent, and ambivalent" (4). The elegy, as Ramazani argues, does not always carry out the successful work of mourning required for a healthy grieving process, instead leaving this work uncompleted. For Ramazani, the persistence of unresolvable grief characterizes the twentieth-century elegy, which breaks from earlier elegies that usually traverse the trajectory of a socially acceptable "healthy" mourning. In his view, the modern elegist does not necessarily achieve resolution but often resists it, writing works that are violent and recalcitrant rather than restorative or transcendent. Ramazani's melancholic or "anti-elegiac elegies" are poems that provide no substitute for what has been lost, instead subverting a literary genre previously thought to be therapeutic (68).[52] Since Ramazani's challenge to the "consolatory promise" of the elegy, other critics have begun to question the restorative function of the genre. Without the modern elegy's promise of renewal, Melissa Zeiger defines "the modernist crisis in poetry" as "the failure of religious belief and consolation, hence of redemptive elegiac

[52] As examples of the anti-elegiac elegy, Ramazani cites twentieth-century poets such as Wilfred Owen and Langston Hughes. Ramazani argues that Owen's World War I elegies for British soldiers counter "the compensatory discourse of patriotic propaganda", while the blues-inspired elegies of Hughes resist assimilating grief to racial norms (68-69).

narrative and poetic closure" (67). David Kennedy similarly characterizes the elegy "as a structure for mourning and consolation that is always on the verge of breaking down and whose efficacy is therefore perpetually in doubt" (13). Instead of reconstructing feelings of grief and loss into a narrative of mourning, the elegy holds the capacity to resist standard conceptions of the "normal" or "healthy" work of mourning, exploring the complex realities of responding to loss.[53]

Ramazani's description of "melancholic mourning" shades the distinction between the two terms, an endeavor that has also been taken up by Derrida. Any act of mourning "worthy of the name", to use Derrida's phrase, is characterized by an interruption within the normative process of healing. In *Points de suspension*, he describes a state of half-mourning, or *demi-deuil*, in which he suggests that any true recognition of the death of the other might resemble melancholia more strongly than mourning. Responding to Freud's assertion that normal mourning occurs when the ego severs its attachment to the lost object, Derrida speaks "of mourning as the attempt, always doomed to failure – a constitutive failure, precisely – to incorporate, interiorize, introject, subjectivize the other in me" (331). In Derrida's description, any true recognition of the death of the other involves a continued attachment and a refusal to forget. Instead of positing a mourner who realizes loss and slowly disconnects from it, Derrida sees mourning as a process that is never fully final. He continues, "I must and

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[53] It is worth noting that discussion of the elegy as aiding or resisting the mourning process primarily derive from Freud's theories, although other psychoanalytic theories of mourning have since been developed. While a thorough analysis of these theories lies outside the scope of this chapter, Kennedy points out that John Bowlby's *Attachment and Loss* offers another way of considering mourning and melancholia. Bowlby expands on Freud's model to account for "not only the number and variety of response systems that are engaged [in mourning] but the way in which they tend to conflict with one another" (31). For a larger discussion of Bowlby's writings, see Kennedy's *Elegy*, Chapter 3, "The work of mourning".

must not take the other into me; mourning is an unfaithful fidelity if it succeeds in interiorizing the other ideally in me, i.e. if it fails to respect the other's infinite exteriority" (331). In its desire not to risk the appropriation of the other, Derrida's conception of half-mourning maintains a sense of loss. There is no strict recovery, no sense of completely working through grief successfully; for Derrida, the idea of "success" in mourning is overturned, so that "*success fails*" and "inversely, the *failure succeeds*: an aborted interiorization is at the same time a respect for the other as other, a sort of tender rejection, a movement of renunciation which leaves the other alone, outside, over there, in his death, outside of us" (Memoirs, 35).

Derrida's conception of half-mourning and Ramazani's description of melancholic mourning both call attention to a structurally incomplete process of grieving, one that resists closure and persists in maintaining an attachment to what has been lost. In addition to Derrida and Ramazani, many theorists have depathologized melancholia, framing it as an ethical, modern response to loss rather than as an aberrant or abnormal failure within the process of mourning. R. Clifton Spargo interprets melancholia "as the elegy's most persistent sign of a dissent from conventional meanings and as its similarly persistent sign of a dedication to the time and realm of the other. Even when it seems to emanate from the esoteric subjective grievances of a specific mourner, melancholia interrogates the symbolic social structures that contain and reduce the meaning of the other who is being lamented" (11). Spargo's conception of melancholia involves taking responsibility for remembering and recounting those who have been lost. Through its resistance to the normative process of grief, the melancholic perspective therefore asks whether the completed work of mourning is always a politically or ethically desirable

goal. Patricia Rae maintains that efforts to leave the past behind may risk the cultivation of cultural amnesia, arguing that successful mourning sometimes "amounts to a forgetting of, or an abdication of responsibility for, what has been lost, and that this amnesia has been too often demanded and paid in the interests of preserving the status quo" (18). The resistance to the completed work of mourning is thus bound up with a resistance to forgetting, with the demand that the past be recalled in order to enact social change. Rather than restoring normative narratives of coming to terms with or getting over the past, melancholic attitudes seek to prevent injustices from being assimilated or forgotten.

With its insistence to remember, the melancholic perspective attempts to retain the relevancy of past events. In South Africa, this work is often performed through a body of literature that deals with the various forms of silencing, torture, and humiliation employed by the apartheid regime. Much of this literature endeavors to bring what novelist Njabulo Ndebele calls "the ugly reality of oppression" into the open (22). Narratives of grief and loss are often conveyed through a melancholic perspective that does not seek to translate suffering into a cohesive narrative; for instance, in his discussion of J.M. Coetzee's fiction, Sam Durrant contends that the work of literature "consists not in the factual recovery *of* history, nor yet in the psychological recovery *from* history, but rather in the insistence on remaining inconsolable *before* history" (431, italics original).[54] It is important to note, however, that "remaining inconsolable" does not necessarily equate to living in a perpetual state of despair. As Colin Gardner remarks, "Indeed the whole weight of the past needs to be remembered and to be spoken for – the

[54] In addition to Coetzee, and de Kok and Murray, who I discuss here, a number of South African authors present narratives that are in some sense inconsolable before the past. See, for example, Richard Rive (*Emergency*), Achmat Dangor (*Bitter Fruit*), Gillian Slovo (*Red Dust*), and Jane Taylor (*Ubu and the Truth Commissioner*).

past with its injustices, its suffering, its indignation, its anguish, its fierce resoluteness – but this needs to be done in a way that is not conservative or retrogressive but creative and forward-looking" (8). There is a distinction between pathological melancholia and the cultural phenomena of refusing closure; the terms discussed here – "inconsolable" literature, "anti-elegiac elegies", "resistant" elegies – encompass a desire to question the normalization of certain practices of working through grief and suggest alternative methods of formulating loss. This type of literature, as it is presented in the poetry of de Kok and Murray, seeks to acknowledge a violent history and bring the past to bear on the political work of the present. Rather than carrying out the "successful" work of mourning, their elegies suggest that, in times of political violence, it is sometimes necessary to resist coming to terms with the past if there is to be any change for the future.

II

Ingrid de Kok's poems recognize a paradoxical need to narrate traumatic experiences that disrupt the bounds of language and comprehension. Her poetry does not fully present a solution to this dilemma, but instead explores the complex displacements and entanglements between memory, testimony, and identity. While de Kok has composed poetry on a variety of social and political issues, including life in rural South Africa, the intersections of gender and race that inform South African feminist movements, and the country's growing HIV/AIDS crises, her poetry on apartheid and the TRC most clearly delineates her exploration of the elegy as well as what the genre can

and cannot accomplish.[55] Like Antjie Krog, de Kok attended many of the TRC hearings in person, and later wove short selections of testimony into her poetry to poignantly illustrate the difficulty of attesting to suffering and grief.[56] As part of her representation of the testimonies, De Kok does not try to fully elucidate the victims' experiences or situate them within normative plotlines of restoration and closure. Instead, she endeavors to convey the often bewildering incomprehensibility of traumatic experience. In a 1998 essay entitled "Cracked heirlooms: memory on exhibition", she calls attention to the difficulty of ever producing a complete account of the past: "Nobody believe that the TRC will or can produce the full 'truth', in all its detail, for all time. It is in the multiplicity of partial versions and experiences, composed and recomposed within sight of each other, that the truth 'as a thing of this world', in Foucault's phrase, will emerge. In this mobile current individuals and communities will make and remake their meanings" (61). Her emphasis on acknowledging and recomposing multiple perspectives results in what she refers to as "the elegiac imperative" of artistic remembrances to apartheid. She frames elegy "as a perspective, rather than a literary form", which does not seek to offer national catharsis so much as it bears witness to histories of struggle. Rather

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[55] See Mashudu C. Mashige's article "Feminism and the politics of identity in Ingrid de Kok's *Familiar Ground*" and Sarah Brophy and Susan Spearey's article "'Compassionate Leave'? HIV/AIDS and Collective Responsibility in Ingrid de Kok's *Terrestrial Things*".

[56] Unlike Krog, however, de Kok has not been criticized for incorporating testimony from the TRC into her writing. De Kok has possibly evaded the controversy Krog faced because her poetry does not cross generic boundaries in the way that Krog's writing does. In other words, de Kok's poetry is viewed as just that: poetry. Critics have not seen her work as laying claim to any objective or factual "truth" in the way that some thought Krog's *Country of my Skull* should, given that it details Krog's time working as a journalist. As discussed in Chapter 2, such distinctions between journalism and poetry threaten to overlook the narrative construction of the news and diminish the truths to which poetry may attest.

than producing a unified narrative, elegy, as de Kok defines it, explores the disjunctions and ruptures of historical crises without attempting to mend them.

De Kok acknowledges that her conception of the elegiac imperative is partly based on Sacks's characterization of the elegy as a "dense matrix of rites and ceremonies", which expresses grief and laments the dead (Sacks 2 / de Kok 62). Along with Sacks, de Kok maintains that "the imagination operates most powerfully within the spaces of absence, loss, and figuration, providing a dialectic between language and the grieving mind. In effect it brings back into our presence the disappeared, in a newly refigured form" (62). Accordingly, elegy has the potential to express what it means to grieve. However, de Kok's formulation of the elegy diverges from Sacks's when it comes to the genre's ability to compensate for loss. In an interview with Erica Kelly, de Kok asserts, "Elegiac poetry (or any art) cannot heal the burden of the past. It can only symbolically reconfigure the past, own its burdens and losses" (37). For de Kok, elegy does not perform a "successful" or "healthy" work of mourning; her poetry does not try to interiorize or introject what has been lost, but maintains loss precisely as loss in order to acknowledge persistent social inequities. While her understanding of the elegy begins with the literary tradition espoused by Sacks, her application of the genre more closely resembles a resistant melancholic position by displacing the recompense that the elegy might otherwise afford.

The work of "reconfigure[ing] the past" is significant to de Kok's consideration of the elegy and her approach to remembrance. For de Kok, reconfiguring is a complicated gesture, one that acknowledges seemingly disparate elements or narratives of the past. The title of her essay, "Cracked heirlooms", serves as a transatlantic allusion to Saint

Lucian poet Derek Walcott's 1992 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory". In the speech, Walcott remarks, "Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of the original shape. It is such a love that reassembles our African and Asiatic fragments, the cracked heirlooms whose restoration shows its white scars" (*What the Twilight Says* 69). Particularly struck by the notion that the scar is still visible even after the wound is healed, de Kok comments, "This gluing together may be the key function of art and cultural education in a time of social change, but it involves seeing and feeling to fragmented, mutilating shards, before the white scar can be celebrated" (62). Whereas Walcott seems to focus on the overall shape of reconstructed societies, de Kok accentuates the fissures, and she borrows the image of the scar from Walcott not to emphasize how the pieces are reformed but to retain the memory of the traumatic past in the social fabric of the present.

In de Kok's perspective, the story of the past exists in shards, and these pieces will emerge through its telling. She maintains that art plays an important role in acknowledging the turbulence of South Africa's past and the lingering uncertainty of its present. While she positions the country's reformed government as a site for "legal remedy and transformational social policies," she asserts that "the reparative capacity of government is limited, and no work of mourning, at an individual or national level, can take place without recourse to other forms of mediation" (60-61). One of these crucial forms includes artistic responses to the nation's historical traumas, and for De Kok, such

responses often portray the processes of mourning and recovery not as finalized, but as slow and painful. She states:

> Cultural institutions and artists face an especially challenging task, of permitting contradictory voices to be heard as testimony or in interpretation, not in order to "resolve" the turbulence, but to recompose it. This involves resistance to increasing pressure on art and the public institutions to contribute directly to the psychic requirements of "settlement" and nation building. If yoked to those imperatives, art too will become victim to the pressure to "forgive and forget." (61)

Once again, de Kok draws from the language of reconfiguring or recomposing, this time to mark a distinction from the idea of resolving. Rather than finding a solution, rather than subsiding or healing, the act of recomposing comprises an artistic response that considers other ways of approaching the past, presenting alternatives to mourning aside from the normative or dominant models. Instead of dispelling or glossing over conflicting viewpoints, de Kok remains attentive to the ways in which past traumas continue to disrupt the present. By recognizing "turbulence" and a multiplicity of perspectives, she points to the heterogeneity of her country's past as well as its present but does not seek to contain its differences. In particular, she stresses the necessity of remembrance, but she reflects a concern that the effort of remembering the past will be subsumed by the project of national reconstruction. De Kok warns against building the newly democratic South Africa around "a grand concluding narrative", which reinforces "social engagements and cultural practices that reflect a 'break' with past politicized patterns. This impulse has the potential to produce newly energetic registers, but equally it has the potential for

amnesia." (61). She does not view reconciliation as a process that concretely breaks from South Africa's past, but as developing from it, remaining attentive to the lingering influence of the past on the present.

De Kok's poem "Bring the Statues Back", first published in her collection *Seasonal Fires* (2006), expressively demonstrates how cultural amnesia might develop as memories of the former apartheid regime are constructed or suppressed. The poem responds to a national program of re-definition, which encompassed the renaming of city streets and public buildings as well as the removal of apartheid-era monuments. After the fifteen-foot statue of former National Party Prime Minister H.F. Verwoerd was pulled from its pedestal in 1994, Isabel Wilkerson described the removal as a "purging ritual that comes with revolution," evoking the cathartic effect that accompanies the release of extreme emotion ("Apartheid Is Demolished. Must Its Monuments Be?"). At its outset, "Bring the Statues Back" addresses the potentially cathartic value of such a ritual, as the poem's speaker describes the removal:

> Remember the gasp, the sheer delight:
> (in memory filmed in black and white)
> apartheid's architect a dangling man
> at the end of a winch on a crane?
>
> We hear he then was moved
> to a garage in Bloemfontein
> where his chipped statue friends
> gaze at him disconsolately. (5-12)

In these stanzas, the image of the once-powerful Verwoerd, who was known as the "Architect of Apartheid" for implementing segregationist policies, becomes unmade. In what seems like a monumentally symbolic gesture, the sculpture of the builder is torn down, reducing the prime minister to the comical image of a "dangling man". Now

hidden away, the statues of former apartheid officials embody the relics of a crumbling, totalitarian past that seems to have lost its relevancy in the more inclusive democratic state. Removing Verwoerd's monument seems to alter its symbolism, as the memory of Verwoerd is reallocated from one of power to a now-defunct object, signifying a shift in the country's changing political atmosphere.

The poem, however, subtly undermines the desire to strictly relegate memories of apartheid to the past. "Bring the Statues Back" mediates the scene of removal through "memory filmed in black and white", a phrase which recalls the film technique of using black and white footage to visually signify a scene from the past. Such a technique creates a very clear distinction between the past and the present, especially when the present is filmed in color, but de Kok's poem muddles this distinction. While tearing down Verwoerd's statue seems like a "break" from "past politicized patterns", the poem begins with the word "Remember", thereby placing a greater emphasis on remembering the past than on forgetting it. As the poem continues, it raises the question of whether removing the statue will make it possible to deliberately forget the turmoil of the past:

> How easy, after all
> to remove a world,
> to erase a crooked line
> and start again. (13-16)

Effacing the imperfections of the past seems like a simple enterprise, and yet the act of erasure does not always result in a total expungement. The trace of the line may still be visible after it has been erased, much like the scars that remain when the broken vase is glued back together. "Bring the Statues Back" questions the efficacy of this gesture of removal, questioning the notion that it is desirable or even possible to make a clean break with the past. The poem cautions against a firm separation from the past, indicating in the

next few lines that there are violent associations with Verwoerd's leadership that should not be forgotten: "But the memory of a belted policeman, / his moustache like a dog on a leash – / let's not lose that" (17-19).

The dilemma of what to do with the monuments to apartheid is a complicated one; on the one hand, preserving these structures runs the risk of sustaining and reinforcing the formerly dangerous and imbalanced systems of power, which could hinder the process of reconciliation. At the same time, de Kok maintains, "But for the project of reconciliation to succeed, individuals and the nation require the physical evidence of our suffering and complicity to be displayed as part of a new pattern. Made visible again, they need to restore to us the vocabulary of the past. The country may be in danger of making the assumption that reconciliation is at hand, or in the hand" ("Cracked Heirlooms" 71). In arguing for the preservation of the statues, de Kok also seeks to alter their function. Instead of honoring Verwoerd or the apartheid government, the statues would now serve as a reminder of the political work that has yet to be completed. Since the monuments provide visual evidence of social inequities, they do not allow those who benefited from Verwoerd's regime to forget their complicity in the apartheid system.

For de Kok, the intention behind the statues thus transforms, no longer functioning as a tribute to apartheid but instead inducing social responsibility and resisting cultural amnesia. Such transformation is one way in which de Kok desires to "recompose" the past. "Bring the Statues Back" concludes with the suggestion that reminders of the past do not necessarily constitute a return to old ways:

> If we auction the statue's buttons
> we might forget the monumental overcoat.
>
> Let's put Verwoerd back

> on a public corner like a blister on the lips;
> let's walk past him and his moulded hat,
> direct traffic through his legs,
> and the legs of his cronies of steel and stone. (25-29)

As with de Kok's desire to view the scars and the fragments, the poem calls for the recognition of old wounds, of the ugly "blister" that has yet to heal, but the acknowledgement of these blemishes will not necessarily result in regression, as the final stanza presents an image of motion. Verwoerd's statue receives no deference in this image, and remains to warn against forgetting the perspectives and policies that led to apartheid in the first place. While monuments are created with the purpose of remembering, scholars have noted that their very production can actually have an opposite effect, leading to cultural forgetting. According to Paul Connerton, "The relationship between memorials and forgetting is reciprocal: the threat of forgetting begets memorials and the construction of memorials begets forgetting. If giving monumental shape to what we remember is to discard the obligation to remember, that is because memorials permit only some things to be remembered and, by exclusion, cause others to be forgotten. Memorials conceal the past as much as they cause us to remember it" (28).[57] De Kok, however, strives to invert this notion in "Bring the Statues Back", as the poem requests the re-installation of Verwoerd's monument to forestall the forgetting of an oppressive history. The poem asks for the statue to be invested with new forms of

[57] The idea that practices of remembrance inadvertently engender forgetting is widespread amongst scholars of memory. James E. Young, for instance, makes a similar remark in *The Texture of Memory*: "In this age of mass memory production and consumption, in fact, there seems to be an inverse proportion between the memorialization of the past and its contemplation and study. For once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember. In shouldering the memory-work, monuments may relieve viewers of their memory burden" (5).

memory and meaning, serving as a reminder of violence that the apartheid regime once attempted to cover up or ignore.

"Bring the Statues Back" raises the question of how to address and remember the apartheid era, an issue that many of de Kok's poems take up. While "Bring the Statues Back" reflects on collective remembrance, many of her poems respond to personal forms of grief and ask how such suffering may be expressed. In a poem published in her 1997 volume *Transfer* entitled "What everyone should know about grief", the speaker purchases a magazine with a headline of the same name but quickly turns away from the advice given by the magazine:

> The story proffers help:
> advises talking as the healing cure,
> commends long walks, and therapies,
> assures the grieving that they will endure,
> and then it gently cautions: let go, move on.
>
> But everyone knows sorrow is incurable:
> a bruised and jagged scar
> in the rift valley of the body;
> shrapnel seeded in the skin;
> undoused burning pyres of war. (11-21)

In refusing to assume that the magazine's counsel will be accurate or helpful, the poem recognizes the discrepancy between conventional remedies for trauma and the lingering traces of grief. If mourning is conceived as a beneficial process that leads to a recovery of the self, the poem interrupts and interrogates this process, asking if a fuller, healed sense of self may ever be regained. Grief remains quite literally embedded in the skin, as the body is presented as a battle-scape that continues to bear the marks of combat, "bruised", "jagged", and as the word "rift" implies, broken. Not only is the shrapnel firmly entrenched in the body, it is also "seeded", indicating that the pain has taken root and will

continue to grow. Despite the article's assertion that grief may be cured, the still-burning pyre suggests that some lingering expressions of sorrow inexhaustibly and interminably remain. Though the magazine's title ("What everyone should know about grief") professes knowledge of suffering and of healing, the poem itself undermines the article's epistemology of grief by denying the idea that sorrow can be conceived as an accessible, comprehensible object of knowledge.

Poems such as "What everyone should know about grief" indicate de Kok's concern with conveying the impasse between a traumatic experience and efforts to represent it. Many of de Kok's poems that take up this issue are published in her 2002 volume *Terrestrial Things*, which includes a section dedicated to the TRC. Like its precursor, Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush", *Terrestrial Things* questions the direction the future will take and explores the difficulty of finding hope in a time of loss. Before turning explicitly to de Kok's volume, it is worth briefly discussing Hardy's poem, which offers a despondent reflection on locating hope for the future. Although the poem was composed at the turn of the century, it bleakly looks back onto the nineteenth century rather than looking forward into the twentieth.[58] The poem opens with its speaker gazing out at a cold, forbidding landscape: "I leant upon a coppice gate / When Frost was spectre-gray, / And Winter's dregs made desolate / The weakening eye of day" (1-4). The first three lines are marked by soft sibilant sounds, invoking a hushed, whispery tone that enhances the poem's lyricism. The simple rhythm and rhyme scheme reinforce the traditional form of the ballad, which in this poem, conveys a hymn-like funeral song for the old century:

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[58] The poem was originally entitled "The Century's End, 1900".

The land's sharp features seemed to be
      The Century's corpse outleant,
His crypt the cloudy canopy,
     The wind his death-lament
The ancient pulse of germ and birth
      Was shrunken hard and dry,
And every spirit upon earth
       Seemed fervourless as I. (9-16)

The poem stresses endings, from the end of the day (the "weakening eye of day"), to the end of the year and the end of the century. The description of the "Century's corpse outleant" echoes the speaker's own action at the start of the poem ("I leant upon a coppice gate"), so that he is made part of the scene rather than remaining a detached observer. This connection places him on the side of the old century, rather than the new one, making him "fervourless" like the country around him. He views the landscape as an ominous symbol of the century's close, as the resonating pair of words "leant" and "outleant" reinforce an impression of leanness and also invoke the laying-out of the dead.

Once the poem establishes a scene of loneliness and decay, the bird of the poem's title intrudes upon the speaker's thoughts. The bird brings a sense of hopefulness, although the poem casts doubt on the speaker's ability to truly attain any feeling of hope:

At once a voice arose among
    The bleak twigs overhead
In a full-hearted evensong
    Of joy illimited;
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt and small,
      In blast-beruffled plume,
Has chosen thus to fling his soul
      Upon the growing gloom. (17-24)

So little cause for carolings
    Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
    Afar or nigh around
That I could think there trembled through
    His happy good-night air

> Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
> And I was unaware. (25-32)

Although the bird's song seems to break through the desolation and bareness of the surrounding landscape, the poem's speaker only hears the thrush's "ecstatic sound" from a distance. The bird's ecstasy, however, is at odds with the hopelessness of the poem's landscape – with what is "written on terrestrial things" – and this landscape grounds the poem's narrator, preventing him from fully reaching the bird's "happy good night air." In contrast, the bird's song appears groundless; suspended above the uninviting land, the bird inhabits a realm not accessible to the speaker. Ever out of reach, the tantalizing joy of the birdsong seems only to ironically convey the bleakness of its natural surroundings. As David Perkins argues in his influential study of Hardy, the speaker's hope of identifying with the thrush provides the drive of the poem. Perkins concludes, however, that the speaker fails to achieve identification and as a result, "feels himself to be incapable of seeing whole, being in some way stunted and incomplete" (262). In lyrical, descriptive detail, the poem describes the dying of the old century, and the speaker cannot positively replace or substitute the dying with the new – hope is out of his awareness.

In *Terrestrial Things*, de Kok adopts the non-consolatory tone of Hardy's poem as a way of cautioning against the capacity of narrative to bring about recovery and closure. At the same time, she does not present a nihilistic sense of loss, but explores the tension between wanting – and even needing – to articulate grief and the difficulty of ever fully doing so. De Kok says of Hardy's poem:

> The point of 'some blessed Hope' is that Hardy's 'I' imagines it as a possibility but is 'unaware': both in the sense of not noticing it and not being shown it exists. He reads a different meaning and lesson from the landscape. The environment the

> poem describes – of deep winter and despair at the turn of the century – militates against 'Hope'; however the bird's song projects a potentially optimistic reading/perspective; and the poem is capable of containing the latter within its sceptical framework – the bird's joy 'illimited' is as much in the poem as the 'broken lyres', 'fervourless' spirit and shrunken pulse. (Kelly 34)

For de Kok, the poem concludes on an ambiguous note, asking if the speaker is at all inspired by the hope of the thrush's song, or if he continues to despair. Though he remains, at the poem's conclusion, unaware of hope, de Kok's reading of the poem suggests that hope nevertheless exists somewhere, even if it has yet to be discovered. This imagined or perceived hope, while not quite attainable in the present, is at the root of political opportunity; as de Kok says, "political situations base themselves on 'some blessed Hope', projected into the future" (34). Whether this hope ever becomes actualized serves as the focus for much of de Kok's poetry, as her work explores the uncertainty of South Africa's transitional political climate at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

Terrestrial Things expands on the tension that de Kok notices in "The Darkling Thrush". While the birdsong is immaterial, and gives flight to hope, de Kok's poetry also seek a connection to "terrestrial things" to maintain perspective in an era that she views as prone to cultural amnesia. It is on terrestrial things that the scars of the past are recorded, and these scars are most evident in a section of the volume called "A Room Full of Questions", which contains poems that respond directly to the Human Rights Violations and Amnesty hearings of the TRC. The title of this section alludes to the formal structure of the TRC itself, in which the commissioners asked both victims and

perpetrators specific questions to guide their testimonies. “A Room Full of Questions” also points to queries to which there are no response, engaging with the complications and uncertainties that arose from the Commission’s aim to disclose hitherto untold stories. As with Krog, de Kok often refers to testimony to expose moments of breakdown or rupture, as witnesses reach a state of impasse. One striking example of such a breakdown occurs in De Kok’s poem “Tongue-Tied”, which asks how the truth may be told when speech is unavailable. The poem begins with the familiar oath, “Do you promise to tell the truth,/ the whole truth and nothing but the truth?” (1-2) As the poem goes on, however, the assumptions underlying the oath – specifically that the truth may be spoken – begin to dissolve:

> Someone’s been hurt.
> But she can’t speak.
> They say she’s ‘tongue-tied’
>
> Like an umbilical neck throttle.
> No spit, sound, swallow.
> Voice in a bottle. (3-8)

Probing the effort to translate the unspoken into language, the poem tests the notion that verbalizing trauma is liberating or healing in and of itself. As the witness’s words are choked by an invisible umbilical cord, the poem’s short, clipped lines reinforce her aborted attempts to speak: she cannot give voice to experience. The formal elements of the poem are likewise characterized by an inability to speak; the alliterative “s” sounds of “spit”, “sound”, and “swallow” are reminiscent of a stutter, hindering full speech, while uttering the short “o” sounds of the assonant rhymes of “throttle”, “swallow”, and “bottle” mimics both the noise and the physical feeling in the throat of choking.

Eventually, the woman manages to speak of the abduction of her children, lending additional resonance to the word "umbilical" in the stanza above, as her connection to her children has been severed by the apartheid police force. The woman ends her testimony by stammering: "That's the truth. So help. Whole. To tell" (20). This inverted expression of the well-known legal phrase indicates that the testimony that is given here is anything but whole, fragmented instead under the possibly incalculable weight of the past. While the very attempt to tell the story indicates a movement towards resolution, De Kok's recomposition of this breakdown interrupts such a progression and thus casts doubt on the efficacy of language to order a traumatic experience into a cohesive whole. The splintered and halting testimony relays the dislocating effects of trauma rather than any comprehensible or cathartic understanding of it.

Poems such as "Tongue-Tied" and "What everyone should know about grief" have therefore led some critics to assert that De Kok views the truth commission process as inadequate. Shane Graham argues that de Kok's poetry "can be read as an implicit critique of the Truth Commission, which shared certain assumptions with the proponents of the talking cure", or the Freudian notion of disclosing and working through painful past experiences, so that for Graham, de Kok dramatizes "the impossibility of telling" (66). While her poetry does offer a critique of language's ability to convey trauma, she does not always position the act of testifying as "impossible". Rather, the process through which her poems describe testimony searches for new idioms of expression, for new ways of speaking to grief. Even though the account given in "Tongue-Tied" cannot provide the "whole" truth, it nonetheless communicates a loss of agency and power that trauma often produces. In her writings on testimony, Shoshanna Felman notes that "one

does not have to *possess* or *own* the truth, in order to effectively *bear witness* to it…the speaking subject constantly bears witness to a truth that nonetheless continues to escape him, a truth that is, essentially, *not available* to its own speaker" (15). Felman indicates that all utterances are potentially at once testimonial and outside the bounds of comprehension; a statement, even an incomplete one, is not necessarily concerned with recognizing a clear, apparent truth, but instead signals a truth that is not "entirely known, given, in advance, prior to the very process of its utterance" (16). As "Tongue-Tied" evinces, De Kok's poetry bears witness to the experience of trauma without attempting to "own" it. She thus positions testimony as potentially creating and accessing the notion that a kind of truth can be found in fragments – and that it is precisely in recognizing fragments as fragments, in respecting their incompleteness instead of attempting to fit them together, that a testimony to the experience of trauma might be told.

It is worth noting the first poem in "A Room Full of Questions" is entitled "Parts of Speech", while the final poem in the section is called "Body Parts." This focus on "parts" reiterates the fragmentation and breakdown of De Kok's language, once again suggesting that traumatic histories cannot always be addressed with assumptions of wholeness and unity. "Parts of Speech" explores the tension between the desire for the language of testimony to perform a redemptive, restoring function, that "begin[s] in pain and move towards grace, / aerating history with recovered breath", and the resistances of certain stories to such a resolution (19-20). The poem explores the ways in which traumatic experiences push language to its limits:

> Some stories don't want to be told.
> They walk away, carrying their suitcases
> held together with grey string.
> Look at their disappearing curved spines.

> Hunchbacks. Harmed ones. Hold-alls.
> […]
> And in this stained place words
> are scraped from resinous tongues
> wrung like washing, hung on the lines
> of courtroom and the confessional
> transposed into the dialect of record. (1-6, 11-15)

In the poem's first stanza, "some stories" are personified as defiant and insubordinate, as though they possess an agency of their own. Though such stories "walk away" from the process of narration, they are hunched and deformed, straining under the burden of their own weight. When words do emerge, they come out forced, "scraped", it seems, from unwilling tongues. The internal rhyme of the verbs "wrung" and "hung" position the process of giving testimony as a sometimes violent experience, the wrenching of a keenly-felt rendition of traumatic experience as it is transcribed into the official record.

In light of the difficulty of speaking to traumatic experiences, the final stanza of the poem then asks if stories are capable of transcending pain:

> Why still believe stories can rise
> with wings, on current, as silver flares,
> levitate unweighted by stones,
> begin in pain and move towards grace,
> aerating history with recovered breath?
> Why still imagine whole words, whole worlds:
> the flame splutter of consonants,
> deep sea anemone vowels,
> birth-cable syntax, rhymes that start in the heart,
> and verbs, verbs that move mountains? (16-25)

This stanza relies on the interrogative form to ask how, if at all, alternative understandings of language and testimony might be conceived. The poem tracks a movement away from suffering towards a space of transcendence that is signaled by verbs such as "rise" and "levitate" and by the desire for a traumatic past "unweighted by stones". Together, these words describe an elevated realm not unlike the one that Hardy's

thrush seems to occupy, and as with Hardy's poem, de Kok questions whether this realm may ever be reached. While the poem's language speaks to the inclination for such a movement, it does not completely escape the contrast of the violence and gravity of the earlier stanzas, where words must be scraped from tongues. As the final stanza asks if words can be equated with a wholeness that is capable of representing "worlds", the poem explicitly references parts of speech: "consonants", "vowels", "syntax", and "verbs". Yet the doubt lingers as to whether language is an adequate medium for accessing the stories of the past; the consonants seems to "flame" up only to "splutter" out, while the vowels, connected to "deep sea anemones", remain at an almost unfathomable depth. In the poem language has the creative potential to "imagine", but the effort to speak arises only from struggle. As with the throttling umbilical cord of "Tongue-Tied", the linking of the phrase "birth-cable" to "syntax" foregrounds the sometimes painstaking labor of shaping experiences through language. Ending on a question, the poem asks whether words are enough to "move mountains" and effect transformative change.

De Kok's poetry accentuates the risks of too quickly conflating the discourses of recovery and repair with the complex work of articulating trauma. Her poems do not necessarily posit rehabilitation or closure as a truly achievable end, and yet the trajectory of the poem sequence from "Parts of Speech" to "Body Parts" moves from a questioning of seemingly essential assumptions about the recuperative power of language to the suggestion that new discursive possibilities might arise from a careful reflection on trauma and testimony. The final poem in the series, "Body Parts", indexes the traumatized bodies of apartheid:

may the wrist turn in the wind like a wing
the severed foot tread home ground
the punctured ear hear the thrum of sunbirds
the molten eye see stars in the dark
the faltering lungs quicken windmills
the maimed hand scatter seeds and grain
the heart flood underground springs
pound maize, recognize named cattle
and may the unfixable broken bone
loosened from its hinges
now lying like a wishbone in the veld
pitted by pointillist ants
give us new bearings.

In "Body Parts", images of damage serve as markers of sustained injury even as the poem longs to view these body parts as vehicles of regeneration. The "punctured ear", for instance, begins to hear again and perceives the wingbeats of "sunbirds" flying overhead, an image which perhaps carries a similar yet to be imagined hope as Hardy's darkling thrush. The poem gestures towards a revitalization of the senses, of the breath, of the pulse, as well as a regeneration of the land. This desired revival does not issue from a reintegration of the already wounded body parts, but is instead focused on viewing them in a different way, as the "unfixable broken bone" becomes a "wishbone". In "Body Parts", as in her other TRC poems, De Kok does not always envision healing as the definable outcome of a traumatic history, but figures transformation as an ongoing engagement with the complex legacies of the past, which create "new bearings" out of what remains. Her poetry does not present recovery as the recreation of wholeness or unity, but as a process that involves looking at the injured fragments and transforming them into a new image. If de Kok's poetry brings up the incompleteness or inconclusiveness of testimony to provide relief or redress, it nonetheless takes up the important task of entering "the room full of questions", of not turning away from

dilemmas that have no immediate response. In questioning preconceived notions of remembering and forgetting, her poetry leads to a more complex relationship with the past, one that is open to alternative perspectives, to the recognition of limitations, and to an engagement with the sometimes inexhaustible expressions of sorrow.

III

If de Kok sees in Thomas Hardy's poem "The Darkling Thrush" a tension between the idea of a "blessed Hope" and the difficulty of attaining this idea, she turns to W.B. Yeats's "Easter 1916" to consider notions of sacrifice and memorialization. De Kok, moreover, is not the only South African poet to look to Yeats in order to explore these issues; Sally-Ann Murray likewise draws on "Easter 1916" in her poem "Easter 1989", which serves as a commemoration of hunger striker Sandile Thusi.[59] With de Kok and Murray both concerned with responding to the injustices of the apartheid system, the question arises: why does each poet explicitly reference Yeats? And why "Easter 1916"?

Yeats's renowned poem on the Easter Rising speaks of the complexity of a socio-political conflict, of how to remember rebel leaders who were executed for defying a colonial force. As Nicholas Meihuizen points out, these concerns resonate with South African struggles for independence:

[59] Thusi was a member of the South African Youth Congress and a researcher for Centre for Community and Labour Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, where Murray held an appointment as an English professor at the time of his arrest. Thusi was detained on June 16, 1988 under state-of-emergency regulations, which allowed the government to hold citizens indefinitely without charges. He began the hunger strike on 18 February, 1989 as a way of protesting his detention without trial. After thirty-eight days, Thusi broke his fast when it was announced the government would release him after facing increasing international pressure.

> "Easter 1916"…brings to mind the long-standing link between Ireland and South Africa in revolutionary matters. In a sense, this catastrophic century's potentiality for unrivalled devastation first became apparent in South Africa, in a struggle for freedom whose characteristics anticipated much in modern warfare. A Boer War monumental arch leading into St. Stephen's Green, Dublin, commemorates Irish engagement in this struggle, where the Boers as much as the British benefited from an Irish presence. Indeed, the 1916 revolutionaries and their sympathizers, including Yeats, had been pro-Boer. (156)

Though both countries have a contentious history within the British Commonwealth, de Kok and Murray do not invoke Yeats to comment on two colonies that seek sovereign rule, but to remark upon the social and racial inequities of apartheid. "Easter 1916" takes on a different resonance in this light, as the focus shifts away Boer independence to independence for South Africa's non-white majority. It could be said, after all, that pro-Boer sensibilities led to a dangerous nationalism which produced the apartheid mindset. If the relationship between Yeats, de Kok and Murray is not about nationalism per se, but about those who stand against oppressive political domination, then it is also not one of straightforward influence: de Kok and Murray do not always try to mimic Yeats or establish concrete similarities with his work; at times, they seem to set themselves apart. Critics have argued that de Kok and Murray each reference Yeats to establish a divide between his status as a poet from the Western European tradition – commemorating men such as Patrick Pearse and James Connolly, whose role in the Easter Rising has made them well-known historical figures – and their position as non-Western poets who write of the largely unknown victims of apartheid. Sandile Thusi, for instance, is a relatively

unfamiliar name, and not much is written of his role as an anti-apartheid activist except for a handful of news articles referencing his hunger strike and the recording of the testimony he gave before the Human Rights Violation Hearings of the TRC.[60] Meihuizen goes on to say that Murray draws on Yeats's description of Dublin in order to foreground its disparities with Durban, where her poem is set. According to Meihuizen, Murray "makes much of [Durban's] geographical and social background to emphasize the remoteness of Yeats's world" (156). In a similar manner, Omaar Hena argues that Ingrid de Kok's poem "Too Long a Sacrifice", which directly refers to "Easter 1916", "marks, self-critically, an asymmetry between high, canonical texts such as Yeats's "Easter 1916 and the specificity of individual losses before South Africa's TRC" (103).

While de Kok and Murray draw attention to people and places that have largely occupied a position outside the Western literary canon, they nonetheless write from a tradition that includes Yeats. They sometimes turn to Yeats to indicate marked differences between the Irish rebels and the apartheid rebels, yet in other instances, they draw from Yeats's rich imagery. If de Kok shares with Hardy a tone of hesitant skepticism that a "blessed Hope" may be attained, she and Murray each identify a similar expression in Yeats's "Easter 1916", one that conveys a sense of uncertainty about which direction the future might take. Alongside Yeats, they ask what will happen to their country following an extreme period of unresolved violence. Living and writing from this period, when the future is unknowable and uncertain, it is perhaps not surprising that de Kok and Murray doubt the compensatory power of poetry to offer hope or solutions. And

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[60] Thusi's hunger strike received news coverage in 1989 as it was ongoing. See Christopher Wren's *New York Times* article, "Jailed South African Says He'll Suspend Long Hunger Strike", published on March 27, 1989. On the same day, United Press International also released an article on Thusi by Jack Reed called "The Longest Participant In A Hunger Strike".

yet, this poetry is part of their tradition and their heritage, and they work within it rather than abandon it altogether. As de Kok says, "In the twentieth century and beyond, the traditional resources of elegy have of necessity been eroded; but its formal gestures still signal more than just a reference back to the history of the genre – they can still somehow remember into the future" (Kelly 37). Although de Kok does not explicitly expand on what it means to remember into the future, this notion offers a way of considering memory that resonates with the melancholic perspective she takes throughout her poetry. Whereas mourning entails a certain amount of forgetting, and idiomatically speaking, involves "leaving behind" feelings of loss,
melancholy persistently carries loss and grief into the future in a refusal to forget.

When de Kok and Murray provide their own re-writings of "Easter 1916" – at some points converging and at others diverging with the original poem – they suggest that elegies such as Yeats's remember into the future by entering into conversation with later elegies, creating linkages across literary traditions and collective histories of grief.[61] Given the canonical status of "Easter 1916", it is perhaps not unexpected that Yeats's poetry continues to resonate with readers across time and space, but after receiving

[61] Yeats likewise forged literary connections within his lifetime that have been widely studied. Joseph Lennon, for instance, discusses Yeats's friendship with Bengali writer Rabindranath Tagore, noting how "Yeats believed that Tagore's verse subtly and lyrically embodied his culture", while "Tagore recognized Yeats's cultural nationalism in Ireland as something important for a colony" (222). Yeats also derived his notions of a national literature from Walt Whitman (see Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, Chapter 9: "Nationality or Cosmopolitanism?" and James E. Quinn's article "Yeats and Whitman, 1887-1925" in the *Walt Whitman Review* (1974, 20: 106-09). In addition, Yeats was influenced by the Noh drama of Japan, to which he was introduced by Ezra Pound in 1913 and which he used as a model in his own drama. See Daniel Albright, "Yeats's Noh Plays and the 19th-Century Mystery Tradition" in *Foreign Literature Studies/Wai Guo Wen Xue Yan Jui* (2015, 37.1: 118-129), and Sekine Masaru's "Noh and Yeats: A Theoretical Analysis" in *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* (1995, 26.4: 135-46).

critical attention for almost a century, the poem risks growing trite or overdone as readings of it become increasingly concretized, often reducing the poem to its penultimate line ("A terrible beauty is born"). It is worth noting that even at the time "Easter 1916" was written, the poem was widely circulated as a symbol of the Rising rather than read for its stylistic or linguistic nuances. According to Roisín Higgins, "The final line of his response to the Rising in 'Easter 1916' was quoted liberally in the international press without much sense that 'a terrible beauty' was anything more than a rhetorical flourish. It became an easy way to convey support for the Rising with all the necessary qualifications" (162). As the poem comes to be known for this single, defining line, it runs the risk of losing subtle shades of meaning that would otherwise indicate the uncertain and destabilized atmosphere in which Yeats wrote. Declan Kiberd explains:

> As a national (rather than nationalist) poet, [Yeats] has tried to articulate the contesting feelings of rival Irish groups at the time – the feelings of the rebels' supporters after the executions; the sentiments of those still convinced of England's goodwill; the pacifists who saw violence in terms of human cost; the ascendancy mockers. However, he foresees that these strands will all be forgotten, as the rebels are converted into classroom clichés and his own poem quoted only for a refrain which will be ripped out of its wider context. The rebels are changed, but into the fixity of heroes in a museum. (217)

With the passage of time, the poem begins to resemble an aging literary monument, gradually flattening out the complex motivations and political maneuverings that were in play at the time of the Rising. It is not only the poem that is transformed into a relic, but

as Kiberd indicates, the rebels themselves also lose their dimensionality as they transition from political agents into historical figures.

As the poem is anthologized, read, and taught repeatedly, it begins to take on the fixed, rigid quality often associated with monuments that represent the past – hence Kiberd's assertion that the rebels take on "the fixity of heroes in a museum". Tom Paulin echoes Kiberd's concern when he asks of "Easter 1916", "Is it really possible, I wonder, to say anything new about this poem? Can anyone face listening to it ever again?" (134). Paulin goes on to say that canonical poems such as "Easter 1916" "are more like pieces of marble. These well-wrought *objets d'art* are so universal, so effortlessly and charmingly eternal, that they have nothing to do with the social world, the now of journalism and the current events which is so productive of printed paper" (135). "Easter 1916" thus points to a problem of canonical works: it is canonical because it continues to resonate as a "great" poem, but it begins to feel rigid and inflexible, irrelevant to the concerns of the present time. For Paulin, one way around this problem is to examine the poem in its moment of production, or "in the society of immediate responses to it" (137). He locates the occurrence of an important political event at the time "Easter 1916" was published in October of 1920: the arrest of Terence MacSwiney, a poet and playwright who became mayor of Cork before his detainment and subsequent hunger strike. According to Paulin, "MacSwiney's long fast against the state concentrated memories" of the Rising, and the "publication of 'Easter 1916' in the last stages of MacSwiney's hunger-strike, or shortly after his death, would serve to place MacSwiney as next in the tradition of dead martyrs for Ireland and would also be a shot in the propaganda war" (150, 144). Nearly seventy years later, in 1989, Yeats's poem would once again be

connected to a hunger-striker, this time in reference to South African Sandile Thusi through Murray's elegy.

When de Kok and Murray respond to Yeats's "Easter 1916" in their own work, they do so to purposefully recall the violence and discrimination of the apartheid era, drawing on the resistant, melancholic elegy, which refuses to complete the work of mourning, to perform the work of memory instead. As de Kok and Murray reinscribe "Easter 1916" and put the poem into conversation with South African concerns, its monumental status begins to shift and ebb. In making "Easter 1916" part of their literary inheritance, de Kok and Murray indicate how the poem may remember across time and place, engaging with South African concerns as well as its local Irish history. The changing ways of reading "Easter 1916" recalls James E. Young's argument that processes of remembrance are a living process, in some sense always unfinished. Specifically addressing the construction of monuments, Young asserts that regardless of how much a monument appears eternal and unchanging, its meaning alters as viewers bring new concerns and understanding to it, so that "it will remain memory forever in process, never completed" (335). Instead of remaining a fixed literary monument, "Easter 1916" begins to resemble the ongoing act of remembrance Young describes when it is read as a work that informs the writings of other poets.

Before turning to de Kok's and Murray's poems in detail, it is worth briefly delineating the aspects of "Easter 1916" that the South African poets later adapt. In particular, the act of personal sacrifice for a political cause and the act of commemorating the dead run through each of the three poems, though de Kok and Murray play off of these motifs in Yeats by altering his initial meanings for a South African context. "Easter

1916" provides a eulogy for the dead while retaining an ambivalent view towards violent resistance. In the poem Yeats first elegizes the rebels with whom he was personally acquainted:

> This man had kept a school
> And rode our winged horse
> This other his helper and friend
> Was coming into his force;
> He might have won fame in the end,
> So sensitive his nature seemed,
> So daring and sweet his thought. (24-30)

Although Yeats does not list them directly by name, readers who are familiar with his life know exactly to whom he refers: the first description alludes to Patrick Pearse and the second to Thomas MacDonagh. Yeats seems to refrain from explicitly naming his friends here because of the personal connection he shared with them, and the details he provides lends them more character and vibrancy than a simple list of names would convey. In the poem's fourth stanza, though, Yeats composes a formal litany of those who were executed:

> I write it out in a verse –
> MacDonagh and MacBride
> And Connolly and Pearse
> Now and in time to be,
> Wherever green is worn
> Are changed, changed utterly:
> A terrible beauty is born. (75-80)

As John Wilson Foster says, "Easter 1916" progresses from the personal to the impersonal, as Yeats "moves through the recollection of imprisoned or executed acquaintances who are unnamed, merely 'numbered', yet readily identifiable to the reader, and reaches the appropriate and identifying finality of rhythmic last names" (137). Yeats's acquaintances assume a new status of martyrdom as part of this progression,

entering into an almost mythical territory of Irish nationalist memory. Following the rebellion, Padraic Colum wrote, "'An Irishman knows well how those who met their deaths will be regarded. They shall be remembered for ever; they shall be speaking for ever; the people shall hear them for ever'" (qtd. Foster 138). Foster points out that Colum quotes Yeats's play *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, through which "Yeats had bolstered the notion that Irish posterity would unquestionably honour patriot martyrs" (138). The Irish rebels, including both those acquaintances whom Yeats does not list by name and those he does, thus become immortalized through verse.

The list of names in "Easter 1916" performs another function as well: it aids in the connected processes of memorialization and mourning. In his study of remembrance, Jay Winter notes that the rituals surrounding war memorials, especially "reading the names of the fallen, and the touching of those statues or those names, were means of avoiding crushing melancholia, of passing through mourning, of separating from the dead and beginning to live again" (115). The uttering of names mediates bereavement, offering a form of remembrance that brings a sense of closure. Similarly, Sam Durrant argues, "One needs the specificity of the name in order to mourn. Indeed naming makes mourning possible by enabling us to speak of people in their absence; it makes it possible to remember people and ultimately to forget them" (437). If naming the dead catalyzes the mourning process, then "Easter 1916" provides a way of coming to terms with grief or loss. In addition to firmly cementing the rebels' status as martyrs, naming memorializes them, commemorating their sacrifice through a formal ritual of letting go, and even the acquaintances who are not directly named become a part of this ritual. While they may be separated from a more public process of mourning, the intimate detail

in which they are described suggests that their inclusion in the poem might at least serve as a private means of mourning for the poet who "write[s] it out in a verse", much like personal memories are shared at wakes and funerals.

As the poem makes clear through its most well-known refrain, the rebels "Are changed, changed utterly" by their participation in the Rising. In "Easter 1916", Yeats paints the rebels as transformed by the mesmerizing strength of their political conviction:

> Hearts with one purpose alone
> Through summer and winter seem
> Enchanted to a stone
> To trouble the living stream. (41-44)

As the rebels are taken over by the spell of civic passion, the poem imagines that their normally mobile, beating hearts are transformed through an almost alchemical process into an immobile stone. This transformation marks one of the ways in which the rebels become changed as Yeats's poem develops, removing them from the course of ordinary life into a possibly unattainable political dream. The next few lines illustrate the rebel's separation from the regular passage of life:

> The horse that comes from the road,
> The rider, the birds that range
> From cloud to tumbling cloud,
> Minute by minute they change;
> A shadow of cloud on the stream
> Changes minute by minute;
> A horse-hoof slide on the brim,
> And a horse plashes within it
> Where long-legged moor-hens dive,
> And hens to moor-cooks call.
> Minute by minute they live:
> The stone's in the midst of all. (45-56)

The phrase "minute by minute" resounds urgently throughout this stanza, signaling continuous, rapid movement in the Irish landscape. In this scene of action, the one

constant is the immobile, frozen stone, signaling the blinding, single-minded force of political passion. Yeats's portrayal of the rebels as "enchanted", of falling prey to historical and civic forces that seem much larger than they are, has led R.F. Foster to argue, "'Easter 1916' is in fact a very ambivalent reaction to the rising, emphasizing the 'bewildered' and delusional state of the rebels as much as their heroism, and moving to a plea for the 'flashing, changing joy of life', as Maud Gonne put it, rather than the hard stone of fanatical opinion, fixed in the fluvial stream of existence" (64).

The final stanza of "Easter 1916" further indicates the poem's uncertainty regarding the rebel's sacrifice. Instead of assuming their efforts will be successful, the poem questions the necessity and the outcome of the rebellion:

> Too long a sacrifice
> Can make a stone of the heart.
> O when may it suffice?
> That is heaven's part, our part
> To murmur name upon name,
> As a mother names her child
> When sleep at last has come
> On limbs that had run wild.
> What is it but nightfall?
> No, no, not night but death;
> Was it needless death after all?
> For England may keep faith
> For all that is done and said. (57-69)

The speaker cannot know when the rebel's sacrifice "may suffice", relegating that question to the unreachable sphere of heaven as he remains grounded in the aftermath of the Rising, contemplating the arrest and execution of the rebels. All that can be done, the poem implies, is to name the rebels, to remember them as Yeats has done, although this commemoration is not necessarily meant to provide any sense of self-indulgent comfort. The image of the mother naming her child appears tender and sentimental, but any

impression of sentimentality becomes undone as the illusion wears off; the rebels, of course, are not sleeping, but dead. With the harsh awareness of this reality come questions that have no easy answers: "Was it needless death after all?" In the poem, there is no way to know with certainty if the rebels' sacrifice was necessary in achieving Ireland's political independence from Britain, and it remains difficult to know what sort of change has taken place and what it will lead to.

In her poem "Too Long A Sacrifice", de Kok takes up a similar concern, asking what has changed in the post-apartheid era. The poem, which appears in her 2006 volume *Seasonal Fires*, takes its title and its epigraph directly from Yeats's well-known lines: "Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart" (*Seasonal Fires* 140). While the title and epigraph are the only aspects of "Too Long a Sacrifice" that overtly invoke "Easter 1916", de Kok's poem subtly alludes to Yeats's in other ways. "Too Long" is composed of seven quatrains, whose two, three, and four beat lines often mimic Yeats's metrical pattern. Additionally, de Kok circles around the question of who, or what, has changed in South African society following the end of apartheid and the implementation of democracy:

> Forensic men
> in the archive of modernity
> interpret the statistics
> tell us things are getting better.
>
> In boom times the suture holds.
> The hungry share their begging bowls.
> Demolished shacks rise from the dust.
> "Life goes on." We're told it does.
>
> But few who have been badly hurt
> are ever healed. In the wounded heart
> there lives a need to hurt in turn,
> perhaps even to be hurt again.

> For those who queue in cold dawn air,
> uncounted by the census,
> the hope barometer falls,
> memory returns like weather. (5-20)

"Too Long A Sacrifice" recognizes the damage that has incurred as a result of South Africa's past, but also suggests that the political narratives of the present offer neither practical solutions nor an alternative to current socioeconomic circumstances. The poem acknowledges those who have been forgotten or omitted from political consideration; specifically, those who are "uncounted by the census". Ironically, in 2006, the year "Too Long" was published, Statistics South Africa failed to conduct a national census and was unable to collect a comprehensive report of the country's socio-economic conditions (www.statssa.gov/za). "Too Long" hence condemns the "forensic" methods that could not successfully compile evidence to back up the claim that "things are getting better". Instead, the poem focuses on the lived experience of suffering, on the wounded heart that remains unhealed. Like the rebels in Yeats's poem, an irreversible change takes place amongst those who suffer, as de Kok asserts that "few who have been badly hurt / are ever healed". For them, "the hope barometer falls", thus dispelling any expectation or desire for improvement. The change that has occurred, in both "Easter 1916" and in "Too Long A Sacrifice", is not necessarily perceived as a positive indicator for the future, but rather expresses anxiety in the face of a future that remains unclear.

Each poem seeks to remember those who have been lost, though "Easter 1916" clearly identifies and names its victims whereas "Too Long A Sacrifice" does not. This difference marks one of the ways in which de Kok subtly distances herself from Yeats and the canonical Western tradition he exemplifies. If the subjects of Yeats poem become

well-known figures of Irish history, their names recorded in historical accounts, the subjects of de Kok's poem – "those uncounted by the census" – are not considered subjects of history at all but have instead been overlooked by the official record. While "Easter 1916" shifts between the unnamed – but still known – and the named, De Kok's poem "Too Long A Sacrifice" focuses exclusively on the sacrifices made by the unnamed and the unknown. Her poem relates an under-written history, one which is not recorded. The lack of personal details or of any proper names recognizes that those who are "uncounted by the census" have been viewed as the objects, rather than subjects or agents, of history. Her reference to these unknown people recalls an occluded history of suffering and loss, a history that discounts them as individuals. In "Too Long A Sacrifice", the nameless cannot be mourned, only acknowledged, as the poem refuses to offer any means of compensating for their loss. Indeed, the poem implicitly asks how those who are unknown and uncounted can even be mourned at all.

Writing from a South African context, de Kok suggests that those who have made the greatest sacrifice go largely unacknowledged: as life flows by around them, they remain caught like the stone in the living stream, never receiving the changes promised by "forensic men". The final stanza laments:

> What to do? Watch and pray?
> No benign conclusion waits
> in the wings, enters to pull the curtain
> down over hunger, grief and hate. (21-24)

In denying the assurance of a "benign conclusion", the poem undermines the notion of the classic narrative denouement, as no "pulled curtain" will descend to signal the end of suffering. Instead, the poem states the impossibility of enshrouding the persistent occurrence of "hunger, grief and hate". De Kok's rhetorical questions are reminiscent of

Yeats's query in "Easter 1916": "O when may it suffice?" By raising these questions, de Kok points to the inability to locate a definable endpoint to suffering.

In a similar manner, Murray's poem "Easter 1989" identifies an oppressive sense of stasis in South African society. She evokes 1916" in form and content more explicitly than de Kok does so in "Too Long A Sacrifice."[62] Like "Easter 1916", "Easter 1989" is comprised of four stanzas and follows, at least initially, the same pattern of iambic tetrameter with an ABAB rhyme scheme. While Murray's poem draws on its precursor, the social and geographical South African background create a distinction between Yeats's characterization of the rebels and her depiction of Thusi. From the outset, Murray is less sure that Thusi's sacrifice will result in any significant changes in her society. In the first section, instead of Dublin streets, Murray presents a Durban lecture room:

> First class of the day. Heavy-eyed
> with sleep, the first years yawn through Yeats
> in unrelenting heat. Outside,
> pale blue and vivid yellow wait.
> A sky that tumbles the sun,
> a sea that plashes the beach:
> minute by minute Durban
> streams into the room as I speak
> of metaphor and history,
> romantic myths and Irish pride.
> Minute by minute while Sandile
> Thusi dies. (1-12)

Here, Murray closely invokes "Easter 1916" not only through direct reference to Yeats himself but also through the repeated phrase "minute by minute", which she takes from Yeats's poem.

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[62] "Easter 1989" was published in a 1992 volume called *Signs: Three Collections of Poetry*, and featured works by South African poets Francis Faller and Joan Metelerkamp in addition to Murray.

In both poems, the phrase "minute by minute" indicates the shifting landscape of the natural world, pointing to the ebb and flow of the "sea that plashes the beach" outside Durban and the "tumbling cloud[s]" rapidly moving in the sky above Dublin. Although Murray links her poem to Yeats's through similar imagery and repeated words (like Yeats's clouds, Murray's sky "tumbles"), she subverts this sense of movement and transformation with the descriptions of her classroom. Students "yawn through Yeats", as though the class is progressing slowly, *only* minute by minute. Here, the phrase loses its urgency, and instead of generating an impression of mobility, an underlying suggestion of stasis and ennui pervades "Easter 1989". Even Yeats has lost his dynamism; by 1989, he has entered into literary history, no longer a living poet but a historical figure worthy of study.

Whereas Yeats presents scenes of movement in the Irish landscape, Murray's verses convey inertia, questioning whether apartheid's resistors will produce any lasting changes in South African society. The inertia Murray conveys juxtaposes the severity of Sandile Thusi's situation with the ordinary routines of everyday life. The poem continues:

> Class ends. We have tea,
> then send to Minister Vlok a fax
> urgently requesting that he release
> or charge all detainees. Afterwhich
> a colleague heads for Durban Surf Life-
> Savers' Club – white males only, such
> is life – to practice in a five
> man rowing team. Pull together. (15-22)

The poem's descriptions of daily routines – having tea, departing for the rowing club – undermine the urgency of the request to the Minister to "release or charge all detainees", Thusi included. The mundanity of this scene seems to echo the "polite meaningless

words" uttered by the poet in Yeats's "Easter 1916", and the rowing team perhaps reflects the "casual comedy" of the everyday (6, 37). Yet the command "white males only" serves as an ominous reminder of the inequalities that led to Thusi's hunger strike and the persistence of those inequalities on a regular basis. As Thusi continues his hunger strike, the poem suggests that some of the very people who protest his detainment are nevertheless complicit in the injustices that maintain the exclusionary social limits of "whites only". With the image of Thusi on hunger strike compellingly lingering in the background of the poem, the collaborative command to "pull together" appears ironic, undermining any true indication of unity against the apartheid regime.

In the second stanza of "Easter 1989", Murray begins to break away from Yeats's poetic form, as her lines no longer follow a strict metrical pattern, but begin to vary in length and meter. When Murray breaks away from Yeats's form, it is to emphasize the South African context of Thusi's hunger strike. It is also in this stanza that Murray presents a list of names that recalls Yeats's naming of the Irish rebels, though Murray's litany recalls a specifically African tradition:

> Placards are raised
> for Sandile, prominent men speak for him
> and other hunger strikers. He is praised
> in the same breath as Shaka, Bambatha, Biko, Tambo and
> Mandela:
> Sandile Thusi is a researcher at the University of Natal.
> He was involved in church youth groups while still at school.
> He was first detained in June 1986.
> He was released without charge after 11 months.
> He was detained again on June 16 1988.
> He has not been charged.
> He has been on a hunger strike for 34 days.
> His action is a statement of hope for the future. (24-35)

With its list of names, the poem positions Thusi as the inheritor of a long line of South African leaders.[63] As "Easter 1989" formally breaks away from "Easter 1916", it begins to more closely resemble the genre of African praise poetry known as izibongo. Originally an oral form of poetry prevalent in both Zulu and Xhosa communities, izibongo developed as a way of preserving the histories of clans as well as individuals. The practice of naming is one of the genre's central components, signaling ancestral relationships and extoling the achievements of the subject of the poem (Neser 9). According to Jeff Opland, "Praise poems are essentially exercises in individuation…encapsulating in a concatenation of discrete nominal references the distinctiveness of a person, comprising allusions to lineage, physical and moral characteristics, and actions in the subject's public career" (85). Traditional praise poetry most frequently describes a filial, biological heritage, though Murray adapts the form to situate Thusi in a heritage that is based in struggle rather than lineage. The leaders she names, from Shaka to Mandela, fought first against colonial rule and later against apartheid. While Murray explicitly acknowledges the ways in which the Western literary tradition informs "Easter 1989", she also recognizes the distinct African tradition of izibongo, so that the poem distances itself both from the tradition of empire and from the dominant discourses of apartheid. By shifting Western conventions into an African oral mode of poetry, "Easter 1989" reveals how formal choices become political choices.

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[63] Shaka kaSenzangakhona, also known as Shaka Zulu, was an early 19th century monarch of the Zulu kingdom; Bambatha kaMancinza, a 19th century leader of a Zulu clan, led a revolt against British rule; Stephen Bantu Biko founded the Black Consciousness Movement and died in police custody in 1977; Oliver Reginald Tambo was an anti-apartheid activist who served as President of the African National Congress from 1967 to 1991; Nelson Mandela was in prison in 1989.

The only affirmative statement in "Easter 1989" is the stanza's final line ("His action is a statement of hope for the future"), yet the poem goes on to question this assertion.In the third stanza, Yeats's impersonal, dispassionate "stone", both an emblem of nationalist spirit and a cold symbol of emotion numbed by rigid adherence to "one purpose alone", attains a personal specificity, as Murray links the stone to Thusi's mother:

> Head bent, his weeping mother lights
> the wire-bound candle. Silence. Prayers.
> Flame haloes glow, then wane. Might
> faith not waver in the glare
> of press and politics? Caught as she is in the camera's eye
> her son's constancy becomes
> at once a shield and an injury,
> the rock foundation and the stone that numbs
> her heart. To murmur his name
> is rash comfort: all must face the danger
> that this awkward fame
> may fashion for the cause a martyred stranger.
> Elderly, held by another son,
> the mother is striking in her ordinariness
> when the TV crews have done.
> Many others wait with her for police
> to charge or release their children. (35-51)

Again, the question of who makes the sacrifice arises, as the poem turns from Thusi's collective, political lineage to his personal, filial one. Presented as bearing the burden of nationalist sacrifice, Thusi's mother experiences a chilling numbness caused not by the anger of political passion but by concern for her son. As both a sign of strength and a source of pain, his hunger strike reveals a complex web of relations: it is not only Thusi who sacrifices, but also his mother and the many nameless "others" who likewise wait as their children are held in police custody. Like the figure of the mother in Yeats's poem, who murmurs the name of her child, Thusi's mother finds no lasting comfort in her son's

name, as the fame it brings her is not heroic, but "awkward". If "Easter 1916" suggests change results from the Irish uprising, even if the poem cannot signify what that change will mean, in "Easter 1989" the situation is once again characterized by a sense of stasis, implicit in the police silence. This stasis contrasts with at least some form of legal activity, where paradoxically, the actions of either charging *or* releasing are preferable to the present state of inertia. These lines recall a statement Thusi released during his hunger strike, in which he said he would "prefer death over continued detention without charge" (UPI). In "Easter 1989", sacrifice is made by waiting, by existing in a sort of purgatory as police detainment continues indefinitely.

"Easter 1989", then, focuses on what is *not* happening as much as on what is, lyrically describing the sensation of being caught in uncertainty. The general impasse is highlighted by the final lines of Murray's poem: "But what has changed so utterly? the students ask / Yeats has no real answers for the class" (70-71). These lines could be read as an implicit criticism of Yeats's poem, pointing to the discrepancies between the heroic martyrdom of the Irish rebels and the uncomfortable fame of South Africa's "martyred stranger", or to the disjunction between the changes in "Easter 1916" that give birth to a "terrible beauty" and the pervading stasis of South Africa, which seems to possess no beauty, terrible or otherwise. This reading, however, would too readily limit "Easter 1916", which does not provide assurances but rather points to the ambivalent and tentative atmosphere following the Rising. According to "Easter 1989", "Yeats has no real answers" – and indeed, he does not – but that is not the purpose of his poem. It is this uncertainty that seems to speak to de Kok and Murray across decades and continents, imbuing their poems with frustration, with anxiety, and with no real sense of closure. As

a literary inheritance, "Easter 1916" offers the imagery and the language of grief and doubt, and through their creative endeavors, de Kok and Murray each draw from these aspects of the poem to comment on their contemporary South African moment – a moment in which the process of overcoming loss is not yet – and is not guaranteed to be – finalized.

IV

Through their poetry, Ingrid de Kok and Sally-Ann Murray consider the problem of coming to terms with trauma following political conflict. Writing from a literary tradition that includes Western forms such as the elegy, these South African poets shift the genre from one that provides consolation to one that stubbornly refuses to perform the mourning process, insisting instead on active remembrance. De Kok and Murray consider South Africa's historical context by looking beyond its borders, to other times, other places, and other literatures of loss, creating transhistorical and transnational connections across literary traditions. At the same time, de Kok and Murray seek to retain the specificities and the complexities of the apartheid struggle, reflecting distinctly South African concerns in their poetry. De Kok calls attention to those who would otherwise go uncounted or overlooked, while Murray references an African form of oral poetry to recognize the confluence of traditions at play in South African literature. They participate in a literary framework that does not authoritatively attempt to introject what has been lost, but explores open-ended expressions of sorrow.

At the time that de Kok and Murray were composing their poems, the violent social and cultural effects of apartheid were ongoing, so that their writings speak to the

difficulty of navigating from a turbulent past into an uncertain future. As such, the questions of hope that de Kok raises in her readings of Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush" largely go unanswered. The poems in de Kok's volume *Terrestrial Things* seem to view hope, or at least any simple trust that all will eventually be well, with skepticism rather than optimism. The doubt her poetry conveys does not, however, equate to a literary expression of surrender. Instead, this very uncertainty is what lends force to literatures of trauma and loss; as de Kok says, quoting her own poem "Parts of Speech", "I feel no despair that language fails or has limited expressive range or access. That tension and paradox is at the root of the activity of writing poetry itself. It is its very material…On the one hand, verbs can, and on the other they cannot, 'move mountains'" (Kelly 35). De Kok's words point to the bewildering struggle that lies at the center of the study of trauma: how to harness language to adequately describe an experience that seems to defy its own expression, how to understand the urge to grieve and move on when the realization of such an urge is often impossible. These paradoxical aspects of trauma are perhaps why it is so widely studied; because it defies any straightforward understanding, representations of trauma continue to resurface in art and literature. It is not always clear how to read these stories, or how to interpret the remnants of loss that they cannot quite contain. And yet, literatures of trauma might not exist for the sake of being known or interpreted. If poetry, as de Kok indicates, does not necessarily offer an uncritical or definite promise of hope, it captures, through its very efforts to find the words to articulate trauma – efforts which might perpetually fail – the enduring struggle of speaking to loss and grief.

Afterword

Writing after trauma: this is the dilemma taken up by the authors in my dissertation. The literary texts considered here forgo closure, acknowledging unhealed traumas and unknown futures. From the writings of Bowen and West, to Krog, Park, de Kok, and Murray, these texts leave us with a legacy of uncertainty, one that asks us to contemplate questions which have no clear answers, but which require contemplation nonetheless. In particular, each of the authors I discuss responds to a paradox inherent in the writing of trauma: namely, how to write of events that seem to lie beyond the bounds of comprehension and representation. As I have discussed throughout this dissertation, language seems an inadequate resource for phrasing trauma, and yet at the same time, language is presented as that which contains the potential to heal survivors of trauma. Encouraged to testify to their experiences, survivors must create the language to express their traumas before witnesses who will acknowledge it. As Leigh Gilmore says of this paradox, "Language is asserted as that which can realize trauma even as it is theorized as that which fails in the face of trauma" (7). After trauma comes the impossibility of speaking as well as the injunction to do so.

The challenge of representing or testifying to trauma is one which the authors discussed in this dissertation do not explicitly seek to resolve. Instead, they often intensify and problematize the issue of traumatic representation in order to suggest that we come to recognize loss precisely through the realization that language sometimes fails. In Chapter 1, Bowen and West each points to a crisis of meaning that arises from a profound inability to understand the trauma of the past. As Bowen's *The Heat of the Day*

reveals, the traumatic event cannot be "read", therefore leaving a thorough understanding of the past ever out of reach. The trauma of the novel comes to be felt through its lack of closure and its refusal to grant its characters any lasting sense of catharsis. In West's writings on the Nuremberg Trial, the trial fails to coalesce into an experience that she can grasp within a positivistic framework of understanding. West's reports on Nuremberg are compellingly open-ended, and rather than recovering what is missing from her experience of the trial, the very sense that something is missing lends weight to her reflections.

If Bowen and West struggle to understand the past, Krog continues to raise the question of how to interpret, articulate, and write about traumatic experience. Her meditation on the TRC in Chapter 2 raises concerns that resonate with those faced by Bowen and especially West in post-War Europe. Like West, Krog is tasked with reporting on a highly publicized proceeding, and both writers evince the inability to frame the events on which they write within a narrative arc. Krog, too, confronts ambiguity at the heart of the TRC hearings, and instead of resolving this ambiguity, she explores it, enacting the difficulty of coming to terms with traumatic experience.

In Chapter 3, Park's *The Truth Commissioner* interrogates a process of public memory recuperation for Northern Ireland to reveal the risks of imposing narratives of healing onto a country still riven by the conflicts of the past. Through continued references to illness and disease, the novel indicates that the violence of the Troubles cannot be contained or mastered by dominant discourses of collective recovery. Furthermore, the novel exposes a profound discrepancy between justice and reconciliation within the workings of the fictional Northern Irish Truth Commission to reveal the process's limitations of fully testifying to grief and loss.

Finally, for de Kok and Murray, the failure to come to terms with the past takes on an ethical and political resonance. De Kok's elegiac perspective calls for the recognition that language cannot completely account for trauma or heal the injustices of the past, while Murray describes a sense of stasis within South African society to gesture towards the persistent inequities of the apartheid regime. In this way, their poetry troubles conventional notions of the elegy as a process of mourning, instead repositioning the genre as a mode that conveys an enduring expression of melancholy.

Each of the authors in this dissertation forgoes closure as a way of transmitting traumatic experience. Those authors who directly respond to trials and truth commissions – specifically, West, Krog, Park, and de Kok – depict these modes of public redress as open-ended, revealing the ambiguities and the complexities within these processes. Trauma, they suggest, cannot be fully contained by institutional efforts to do it justice. However, the writers discussed in this dissertation view these efforts with varying degrees of success and failure. Bowen, who does not explicitly write of a legal form of redress but offers an insightful reflection on the Paris Peace Conference following World War II, characterizes the Conference as a disappointing "anticlimax" to the reconstructive endeavors to seek justice in the years following the war (67). West's writings on Nuremberg, meanwhile, exhibit an indecisiveness regarding the trial that she does not seek to resolve: while she frequently calls attention to the failures of the trial to compensate for the unimaginable crimes of the Holocaust, she also comments on the necessity of confronting and taking responsibility for the past, noting, "It is only by making such efforts that we survive" (250). Krog, too, comes to recognize the importance of the South African TRC, remarking, "Painstakingly it has chiseled a way beyond

racism and made space for all our voices. For all its failures, it carries a flame of hope that makes me proud to be from here, of here" (364). West and Krog both seem to suggest that processes such as trials and truth commissions are too complex not to encompass both successes and failures, and for all their shortcomings, these public forums nonetheless play a crucial role in acknowledging the trauma of the past even if they cannot completely contain or account for it. On the other hand, de Kok and Park each express a similar perspective that legal modes of redress are limited in their ability to express sorrow and foster collective healing. De Kok sees the reparative capacity of government as "limited", asserting that "no work of mourning…can take place without recourse to other forms of mediation", including literature and the arts (61). And in an interview in *The Guardian*, Park claims, "What I have come to realise is that communal healing is not to be found in truth commissions or in institutions, but is simply to be found in the renewed rhythms of life" (Sansom 2012). Taking my cue from the various perspectives of these authors, my dissertation does not seek to offer a final word on the efficacy of on trials or truth commissions as modes of reconstruction or redress; to make such a sweeping claim would be to inflict a comprehensive framework of understanding onto these processes in the very way I have sought to dispel. Instead, this dissertation accentuates the potentials as well as the limitations of these mechanisms in order to acknowledge the continued debate that surrounds them.

In addition to leaving open institutional forms of redress, the authors I consider reinforce their denial of closure by defying a literary institution as well – namely, that of literary genres. As Frederic Jameson says, "genres are essentially literary *institutions*, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the

proper use of a particular cultural artifact" (106). Jameson, however, also recognizes that literary texts inevitably reveal "generic discontinuities" as well as the contingency of genres themselves (144). In the writing of trauma, such discontinuities are not simply inevitable but constitute pressure points through which writers explore the difficulties of expressing traumatic experience in language. Throughout this dissertation, I have made note of how each author breaks with generic norms in distinct ways. For instance, Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* is classified as a spy novel, though my reading of it shows how its rejection of closure disrupts the conventions of spy fiction. In a similar vein, Park's *The Truth Commissioner* shifts away from the traditions of the political thriller by concluding in a state of suspense and withholding a satisfactory moment of revelation. Moreover, West and Krog each struggle to conform to the expectations of journalism; West finds that Nuremberg cannot fit within the narrative frameworks of journalistic writing, while Krog provides a critical self-reflection of journalism's shortcomings, turning to poetry when her reports cannot encompass the sorrow she witnesses. Finally, De Kok and Murray transform the elegy so that it no longer works through the mourning process but reflects a melancholic refusal to come to terms with grief and loss. Murray also inflects the European lyric with African forms of oral poetry to show how she extends the genre to acknowledge the numerous literary traditions that have informed South African writing. All of these genres are recognizable – spy novel, political thriller, journalism, and poetry – and yet they have been ambiguously hybridized and innovatively stylized.

By digressing from certain assumptions of genre, these writers reinforce a lack of closure through the expectation left unanswered, the genre unfulfilled. In their literary

responses to trauma, they experiment with genre in a way that exposes the limits of language and of categorization. The very notion of genre, of delimiting and classifying, resonates with the impulse to define trauma or phrase it in discrete terms, though the authors I discuss resist efforts to concretely "know" or understand trauma through their resistance to generic boundaries. In "The Law of Genre", Derrida argues that genre necessarily marks limits, though as he significantly notes, "Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging" (230). The distinction between belonging and participating is important: texts do not belong to a genre as in a taxonomic relation, but they participate in genre through a performative engagement. According to Derrida, a text's participation in genre gestures towards the ability to continually "re-mark" or reconstitute literary forms. For the authors discussed here, textual re-markings testify to traumatic experience; if traumatic experience defies representation, literary responses to trauma often evade straightforward categorization and may distance themselves from generic conventions in order to impress a sense of disorientation, suffering, and loss. In the writing of traumatic experience and its aftermath, generic instability serves as an indicator of what is uncontextualizable about a traumatic event; that is, the breakdown of genre reminds us that we do not always know how to write, read, or interpret trauma.

Trauma often invokes an array of idioms: coming to terms with the past, letting go, laying to rest, moving on. Such phrases describe the impulse to liberate the present from the traumatic past, and yet the authors in this dissertation confront the impossibility of ever completely fulfilling these expressions. Through the open-endedness of their texts, they do not attempt to impose epistemological certainty onto the writing of trauma.

Indeed, these authors – from Bowen and West, to Krog, Park, de Kok and Murray – compellingly acknowledge grief and loss through their very failure to make sense of or represent trauma through language. At the depth of their writing resides a kernel of traumatic experience: the radical displacement of knowledge. Their texts refuse to ground or cohere around a finalized narrative of traumatic events, gesturing instead towards the unsettling and shattering tenor of trauma and its aftermath – in which their writings still linger.

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