

Staging Transition: The *Oresteia* in Post-Apartheid South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Aeschylus' *Oresteia* dramatizes the meaning and political deployment of justice, concluding with the transformation of justice as vengeance into the legal justice of Athens's new democracy. In this essay, I examine two dramatic texts that draw on the *Oresteia* within another context of transitional justice: post-apartheid South Africa. In Mark Fleishman's *In the City of Paradise* and Yael Farber's *Molora* the distorted family relations within the house of Atreus come to represent the distorted relations within South Africa, a nation haunted by a similar cycle of vengeance. Drawing on Aeschylus, both playwrights dramatize the challenges that South Africa faced after the end of apartheid: how to get beyond vengeance, how to reconcile a nation torn apart by decades of injustice, and how to change from a system of apartheid to a non-racial democracy. They make explicit reference to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), established in 1995 to forestall the bloodshed that everybody expected after apartheid officially ended and to facilitate the transition to a new, democratic South Africa. In this chapter, I consider this political transition from apartheid to post-apartheid South Africa in relation to the cultural exchange between antiquity and the present. This focus directs me to a number of interrelated topics, ranging from memory to justice, from truth to forgiveness, from storytelling to theater, from amnesty to reconciliation.

Introduction

Aeschylus based his *Oresteia*, the only complete trilogy of Greek tragedies known to us today, on the ancient myth of the house of Atreus, and set it in the aftermath of

the Trojan War. Nonetheless, the trilogy held great contemporary relevance when it was first performed at the Dionysia festival in 458 BC, as it marked the transition of Athens from a tribal culture ruled by customs to a democratic society governed by constitutional law (Ziolkowski 1977, 20).¹ Throughout the *Oresteia*, Aeschylus dramatizes the meaning and political deployment of justice, concluding his trilogy positively, with the transformation of justice as vengeance into the legal justice of Athens's new democracy. In this paper, I discuss two dramatic texts that draw on the *Oresteia* within another context of transitional justice: that of post-apartheid South Africa. The first is Mark Fleishman's *In the City of Paradise*, which premiered at the University of Cape Town in 1998 as a collaborative production with his drama students, who also formed the cast. The second is Yael Farber's *Molora* (Sesotho for "ash"), first performed in Germany in 2004.² In both plays, the distorted family relations within the house of Atreus come to represent the distorted relations within South Africa, a nation that has been haunted by a similar cycle of vengeance. Because, as Farber states, the *Oresteia* "unflinchingly articulates the spirals of violence unleashed in the pursuit of righteous bloodshed" (Director's note, personal communication).

Like the other contributions to this volume, my analysis concentrates on the relation between art and politics. While Joaquín Barriendos Rodríguez's essay on global art and the politics of mobility describes a general condition, I employ a more case-specific approach, viewing the political transition from apartheid to post-apartheid South Africa in relation to the cultural exchange between antiquity and the present. My focus, then, is on the politics involved in cross-temporal migration, a focus that directs me to a number of interrelated topics, ranging from memory to justice, from truth to forgiveness, from storytelling to theater, from amnesty to reconciliation.

Narrating the Past

Both Fleishman and Farber draw on Aeschylus' *Oresteia* to dramatize the challenges that South Africa faced after the end of apartheid: how to get beyond vengeance, how to reconcile a nation torn apart by decades of injustice, and how to change from a system of apartheid to a non-racial democracy. They make explicit reference to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), established in 1995 to forestall the bloodshed that everybody expected after apartheid officially ended and to facilitate the transition to a new, democratic South Africa. The TRC was the product of negotiations between Nelson Mandela's African National Congress (ANC) and F.W. de Klerk's National Party (NP). Its work was divided among three committees: the Human Rights Violations Committee investigated the human rights violations that occurred between 1960 and 1994 and organized hearings in which victims and perpetrators publicly told their stories; the Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee was charged with formulating proposals with regards to victims' rehabilitation and restoration; and, finally, the Amnesty Committee considered applications for amnesty.

As its name implies, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was intended to achieve reconciliation by uncovering the truths about the past and providing the basis for developing a shared memory. Rosemary Jane Jolly suggests that, in the context of the TRC, this appeal to a “shared memory” and to “truth” should not be understood as an attempt to legitimize a master narrative and impose an official history; rather, the terms refer to a heterogeneous construction that remains open to debate, primarily because the TRC composed its narrative from the testimonies of a variety of people, who were allowed to recount their stories in their own words, rather than being interrogated by committee members (2001, 701). Michael Jackson discusses how storytelling thus re-empowers victims because it enables them to actively rework, rather than passively relive, past experiences of suffering (2002, 15). In this respect, storytelling implies agency, the very agency victims have previously been denied. It is also a means to relegate traumatic experiences to the realm of memory, because, as Mieke Bal asserts, only by being made “narratable” can traumatic events enter memory (Bal, Crewe, and Spitzer 1999, x).

Storytelling is important in both Fleishman’s and Farber’s plays. Their characters repeatedly insist on telling *their* stories, in conveying *their* subjective truths. A good example from Fleishman is Clytemnestra’s use of the form of a fairy tale to tell Orestes about Agamemnon’s sacrifice of Iphigenia, starting with “Once upon a time, in a land far, far away, there lived a weak and wicked king” (28). Clytemnestra can talk about her suffering only in the form of the fairy tale, a distanced, third-person account. In Farber’s *Molora*, the entirety of the action is enclosed within the framework of a TRC hearing, where Elektra has come to hear the testimony of her mother Klytemnestra—the only white character in the play—whom she witnessed brutally murdering her father, Agamemnon, when she was a child. The conflict between Elektra and Klytemnestra, victim and perpetrator, illustrates an essential difficulty with the TRC hearings, namely that testimonies describing the same experience often did not correspond; more generally, that one event may generate a variety of (possibly contradicting) stories and truths. Elektra confronts her mother with the power of one who is free to speak, as one who can determine and control what is told: “With which of your evils shall I begin my recital?” she says, “With which shall I end it?” (5). Because stories do end and, affirming her play’s relevance beyond the particular context of South Africa, Farber explains how the “ash” of the title *Molora* refers to this finitude:

Our story begins with Orestes returning home with a tin full of ash. It is the state from which we all come, and—from the concentration camps of Europe; the ruins of Baghdad, Palestine, Northern Ireland and Rwanda . . . to the ash around the fire after the storytelling is done . . . it is a state to which we must all humbly return. (Director’s note)

Farber’s poetic transition from ash as a residue of the violence that victims experience privately, to the ash that remains after the subsequent recounting of this

violence, when the private experiences of victims are brought into the public realm, demonstrates how storytelling allows victims to transform their inner monologue into social discourse (Jackson 2002, 15). Though Farber emphasizes the shared common humanity that underlies historical and socio-political distinctions, I agree with Dennis Walder that her indiscriminately yoking together of very different events, people and experiences is sentimental and damagingly blurs history and difference.³

As a narrative form, storytelling inevitably remains distanced from the legal narrative of the law court. It is remarkable, therefore, that the TRC privileged storytelling in its quasi-judicial Human Rights Violations hearings. The commission did so for a number of reasons: because it recognized the healing potential of telling stories, because it understood that by telling their stories “both victims and perpetrators gave meaning to the multi-layered experiences of the South African story,” and because it considered “the process of storytelling [was] particularly important” in the “(South) African context, where value continues to be attached to oral tradition” (Final Report I 1998, 112). According to Mark Sanders, this latter statement is problematic, because the simultaneous joining and disjoining of “South” from “Africa” suggests that “it is not simply stories of people who have suffered, but the stories of Africans, African stories, for which the Truth Commission wishes to leave a domain of telling of which it constantly risks dispossessing them” (2000, 20). In Sanders’s opinion, the TRC’s characterization of storytelling as “subjective” implicitly sets it in opposition to the “factual evidence” that will be brought to light:

The commission never attaches itself as agent, as the subject of utterance—not even subjectively—to the ethnographic datum that “value continues to be attached to oral tradition.” There is repression in its avowal. Africa, silenced in South Africa, speaks in the form of “oral tradition,” to which the Truth Commission will accommodate, just as legal modernity finds a place for “custom.” Yet, just as the Constitution maintains ultimate authority by reserving the right to overrule, and even define, “customary law,” the commission draws back from attaching “value,” in its own voice, to storytelling. (2000, 21)

Sanders’s comment seems valid. Not only did the TRC link storytelling to the notion of “personal or narrative truth,” it also distinguished this truth from three other notions of truth: “factual or forensic truth,” which referred to empirical, objective truth; “social or ‘dialogue’ truth,” established through interaction and debate; and “healing and restorative truth,” related to the public acknowledgement of suffering and its beneficial effect on the healing processes of both individuals and the nation at large.⁴ By conceptually distancing the “personal, narrative truth” revealed through victims’ testimonies from the “factual or forensic truth” of the modern law court, the TRC ultimately consigned people’s experiences to a separate, pre-legal, and pre-modern domain. Moreover, while victims were encouraged to tell their stories and state their personal, narrative truth, the hearings of perpetrators were restricted to

legal, forensic truth, and offered little room for emotional displays or storytelling (Shore and Klein 2006, 313; 317). It seems problematic that the notions of truth that were employed in the various hearings were so different from one another, especially if victim and perpetrator accounts were supposed to together construct “the South African story.” Still, the coexistence of different types of discourses on truth does suggest that the commission intended to emphasize multiplicity and diversity, that it was aware that the story it sought to construct would remain fractured, and that the singular “Truth” of its title required a more nuanced definition.

Jolly finds that the TRC’s emphasis on storytelling suggests that the commission ritualized “that which can be counted on to resist closure—narrative,” and that the capacity of this ritual to resonate on many levels, “its surplus of meaning beyond the mechanics of secular and legal concepts of violation, testimony, proof, confession, judgment, punishment, financial compensation, even the truths the commission itself seeks to verify” held great power, as it “serve[d] its mandate of contributing substantially to the creation of South Africa’s new democracy” (2001, 709–710). Jolly thus establishes a close relation between storytelling and nation-building. The TRC hearings created a space in which different, sometimes conflicting, voices could be heard and, in this sense, demonstrated what apartheid had oppressed: openness and debate, negotiation and contestation. In other words, the hearings promoted and performed values that were to shape the new democratic South Africa. Barbara Cassin addresses the specific role of storytelling, relating it to ancient Greece:

Just as the discourses, deliberations, epideictic and judicial speeches performed in the Ancient Greek city . . . the act of storytelling performs the as yet unheard history of the South African community; and this community constitutes itself through this process, with “history-history” being unraveled from the “story histories.” (2002, 27)

The stories that are told in the testimonies together construct the history of South Africa, because testimony performs the transition from the personal to the public domain and thereby, states Paul Ricoeur, “perform[s] the transition between personal memory and history” (2004, 21). Through testimony, then, storytellers become active agents of the performance of history; they become history’s subjects rather than its passive objects.⁵

Nonetheless, the relation between the role and deployment of narrative within the TRC and the project of nation-building and historiography is more complex than this, because though the narrative constructed was indeed heterogeneous, this heterogeneity was inevitably highly arbitrated and mediated. First of all, the stories of victims and perpetrators were automatically framed by and incorporated within the new state discourse, which was concerned with creating a shared point of origin from which a new nation could be constructed. The hearings were highly mediated events in other ways as well, ranging from the initial statement-taking prior to the hearings

and the selection of testimonies that fitted the TRC mandate of politically motivated human rights abuses, to transcription and translation of testimonies in English (Driver 2006, 5). It was decided beforehand which stories would be narrated at the hearings, and which testimonies would also be broadcast and so reach a wider audience. Since only crimes with a “political objective” were investigated, the countless people who had been economically exploited and victimized on a daily basis were not considered “victims” of the apartheid state. The emphasis was on the political, but of course apartheid terror did not halt at people’s doorsteps. Moreover, because the TRC restricted itself to the human rights violations committed between March 1, 1960 and December 5, 1993, the long history of racism and violence that preceded this period remained unchallenged, as well as the violence that occurred in the transitional period after apartheid officially ended (Holiday 1998, 46). It could be argued, as it has been by Benita Parry, that though the TRC did succeed in recovering fragments from the past, it did not manage to deal with the structural history of power relations and racism (2004, 120).

Not only was the arrangement and staging of the testimonies highly mediated, but there was also mediation *within* the narratives themselves. Drawing on discourse analysis, Jan Blommaert, Mary Bock, and Kay McCormick examine the TRC as what they call an “exceptional discourse event” to demonstrate that offering people a space to tell their stories does not necessarily do away with, and can actually accentuate, past inequalities. Some people may, for example, lack the communicative skills to make themselves heard beyond the immediate context of the hearings, or the interlocution of commissioners may result in the misinterpretation of testimonies (2006, 41–42; 66).⁶ While storytelling can confer agency on those who tell the story, this agency is always conditional and mediated.

In its final report, the TRC acknowledges that the narrative it constructed would inevitably remain fractured, stating that it “tells only a small part of a much larger story of human rights abuse in South and southern Africa” (Final Report I 1998, 24). Nonetheless, it remains important to recognize how mediation and fragmentation influenced what was to become *the* narrative, *the* history, or *the* public memory of South Africa, the point of departure from which a new democratic nation would be constructed. As Moon states, in order to fulfill its intended role in the process of nation-building, the TRC had to construct a linear narrative in which there was a past of suffering and inequality; a present of confession, testimony, and mourning; and a future of reconciliation and democracy (2006, 269). Farber’s *Molara* restores emphasis to the personal nature of suffering. Her Elektra and Klytemnestra appear on stage at a TRC-like hearing, but unlike the testimonies of many people who spoke at the TRC, their narratives are not pre-structured by a discourse of national reconciliation or mediated by commissioners’ interruptions or reinterpretations. Moreover, unlike many women who spoke at TRC hearings, the suffering they narrate is their own.⁷

Revealing and Healing

Through the confrontation between mother and daughter, perpetrator and victim, Farber portrays the brutal human rights violations that the various TRC hearings have brought to light, metaphorically representing how, as Farber says, “like Elektra, countless South Africans came to live as ‘servants in the Halls of their Father’s house’” (Director’s note). Farber instructs that the action should be set in “a bare hall or room—much like the drab and simple venues in which most of the testimonies were heard during the course of South Africa’s ‘Truth and Reconciliation Commission’” (2). Klytemnestra and Elektra sit behind two tables with microphones. In between the tables stands a raised stage on which the story will be reenacted. The chorus of women, Xhosa singers from the Nqoko Cultural Group, sit to the back of the performance area and the audience is located at the front; both are incorporated as witnesses to the hearing. During their testimonies, Elektra and Klytemnestra step onto the raised stage, into the performance space, to reenact fragments from the past.

Farber’s use of the metatheatrical device of the play-within-the-play points to the theatrical nature of the TRC hearings, hearings that, as Catherine M. Cole observes, were highly performative events in terms of their “theatrical and dramatic emotional displays, improvisational storytelling, singing, weeping, and ritualistic lighting of candles” (2007, 167; 174). They staged confrontations between victims and perpetrators in front of an audience that reached far beyond those present in the various venues, since not only were transcripts of the proceedings published in the newspapers, but many of the hearings could also be witnessed live on radio and television. The TRC toured South Africa, in Cole’s words, “like a traveling road show,” and held hearings on raised platforms in churches, town halls, and community centers throughout the country (2007, 172).

Entering the various venues, victims, perpetrators, and audience members were greeted by enormous banners that read “Revealing is Healing” and “The Truth Will Set You Free.” These were powerful slogans that were intended to frame the entire TRC project, since they legitimized the commission’s name by establishing a direct connection between “truth” and the sought-after end point of “reconciliation” and “healing.” The belief that people would be healed by publicly revealing their stories and that this would in turn result in the healing of the entire nation was idealistically but also ideologically inclined: without some preliminary sense of national healing and reconciliation, it was difficult to imagine the transition to a new and democratic South Africa. By thus referring to personal healing, national healing, and national reconciliation as if they were exchangeable concepts, the TRC created a language in which the relatively distinct discourses of psychotherapy and politics became conflated.

Richard A. Wilson, in a book critical of the politics of truth and reconciliation in South Africa, argues that, “for all their media coverage, TRC hearings were often

little more than a symbolic and ritualized performance with a weak impact on vengeance in urban townships” (2001, 227). Benita Parry similarly questions whether “the public staging of mourning can truly facilitate national catharsis and psychotherapeutic healing” (2004, 187). While Wilson and Parry emphasize the theatrical framing of the hearings, Cole analyses the performative aspect within these hearings and suggests that the “dramatic, unruly, ephemeral, embodied, and performed aspects of live hearings potently expressed both the power of the TRC as well as its severe limits in truly grappling with the magnitude of the violations of human rights in South Africa’s past” and that it was largely because of their performative nature that the live Human Rights Violations hearings were so “*affective*, and consequently, [they were] effective in facilitating, however imperfectly, a transition from a racist, totalitarian state to a non-racial democracy” (2007, 179). Cole’s argument is compelling:

Whatever the victims’ intentions or expectations were of the commission, their words, gestures, cadence, intonation, and embodied expressions are now in the public domain, and this material deserves to be closely analyzed. The picture that emerges from such analysis is complex and contradictory, full of details that both confirm and resist the dominant narratives of the past and of the TRC’s own mission. We also see how individuals performed within the commission the particular truths that they were trying to achieve. In the disjunctions between participants’ performances of truth they wished to perform and the commission’s public iteration of the truths it wished to perform, we come closest to perceiving the complexity of the knowledge the TRC brought into being. (187)

Cole emphasizes, then, that the disjunctions between individual testimonies and the larger narrative that enclosed them point to the performative power to challenge the dominance of this overarching narrative from within. However, even if victims succeeded (partly or wholly) in performing their truths, the question remains to what extent this resulted in personal healing. As Grahame Hayes observes, in spite of what the banners at the entrance of the TRC venues asserted, “*just revealing is not just healing,*” because healing depends on “*how we reveal, the context of the revealing, and what it is that we are revealing . . . what people have to reveal might not be healable, or at least not healable by means of the one-off revelation before the TRC*” (1998, 43; emphasis in text).

That the relation between revealing and healing is not self-evident is clear throughout Farber’s play. The audience is left to wonder whether Electra will ever be able to heal from the violence she has been and is still subjected to. Elektra testifies about the torture she has suffered at the hands of her mother, for example with the “Wet Bag Method,” which was used by South African security police to torture political activists.⁸ The audience also sees torture performed when Klytemnestra stuffs a cloth into Elektra’s mouth and burns her with cigarettes. During the interrogation,

which (so the stage descriptions instruct) Electra endures “like a political resistance fighter,” Klytemnestra quotes, from Genesis 9:25, the curse that Ham’s father Noah places upon Ham’s son Canaan: “Cursed be your children. The servants of servants shall they be unto their brethren” (11–12). Ellen van Wolde discusses how this episode was often referred to as a biblical legitimization of apartheid theology, understanding the Africans as the descendents of Ham and, therefore, a people destined to be servants (2003, 13–14).

Seeing the suffering Elektra had to endure, the audience is led to understand why she feels that “if the guilty pay not with blood for blood—then we are nothing but a history without a future” (6). For Fleishman’s *Electra*, the future similarly demands revenge. She, too, is scarred by years of abuse and imprisonment; she, too, believes that “only violence can save us” (19). Even Orestes, who desperately tries to convince his sister of the need to break the cycle of revenge, is eventually driven to kill, first Aegisthus, and then his mother Clytemnestra. Both playwrights show that violence begets violence and both dramatize Nietzsche’s warning that “Whoever fights monsters should take care that in the process he does not become a monster” (1966, 98). Farber’s *Klytemnestra* understands that danger from her own experience and warns her children that “Nothing—nothing is written./ Do not choose to be me. The hounds that avenge all murder will forever hunt you down” (55). But her warning seems in vain. In what is arguably the most tragic moment of the play, Orestes faces his mother, ready to strike her, crying in rage and pain: “YOU HAVE MADE ME WHAT I AM!” (56).

Orestes’ desperation over having turned into a perpetrator articulates one of the difficulties that arose in the confrontations that the TRC hearings staged, namely that the distinction between perpetrator and victim was often blurred, and that some people were both perpetrator and victim at the same time (Sarkin 2004, 82). Claire Moon discusses how the subject categories of “victim” and “perpetrator” were central to the TRC’s public performances of national reconciliation (2006, 12). She explains that the categories of “victim” and “perpetrator” were institutionalized by means of the discrete committees for which people appeared to give their testimonies, to the extent that those testifying first had to decide whether their submission would be a “victim” or a “perpetrator” submission (2006, 267). In their plays, Fleishman and Farber most effectively underline the possible conflation of these two positions in their portrayals of Clytemnestra/Klytemnestra as both abuser and victim. In Fleishman, Clytemnestra talks about the loss of her daughter Iphigenia and about the shame she felt when Agamemnon, portrayed here not as a noble king who is torn, but as a brutish tyrant, brought his concubine Cassandra into her house. In Farber, she tells Elektra how she first met Agamemnon, “the day he opened up my first husband and ripped out his guts. He tore this—my first born from my breast. Then holding the child by its new ankles—he smashed its tiny head against a rock.

Then took me for his wife” (22). Clytemnestra/Klytemnestra has her own stories of injustice to tell.

Not only do Fleishman and Farber challenge the binary of perpetrator and victim, they also de-racialize it by showing that these subject positions cannot be distinguished along racial lines. It is nonetheless important to emphasize that violence in South Africa was racialized to an extreme extent. Though many white South Africans suffered from the violence apartheid engendered, non-whites (ethnically categorized as “blacks,” “coloureds,” and “Indians”) were the objects of systematic oppression.⁹ Different from Farber, Fleishman gives no instructions with regards to the racial make-up of his cast, and race remains wholly absent from his text.¹⁰

Another important consequence of Fleishman’s and Farber’s focus on Clytemnestra/Klytemnestra’s history of suffering, a suffering that is absent from Aeschylus, is that it challenges her traditional representation in Western tradition. While Clytemnestra could as easily be depicted as a trauma survivor, argues Kathleen L. Komar, the literature of antiquity usually figures her as the root cause of violence, “representing several major roles traditionally assigned to women,” namely “the demonic and vengeful woman, the adulterous wife and the avenging mother” (2003, 1–2; 6). In undermining the traditional representation of Clytemnestra, Fleishman and Farber address the gender politics this representation embodies. By so doing, they achieve something else as well. Rather than essentializing tragedy as an a-temporal, universal myth, they demonstrate that the migration of antiquity to the present is a complex process that involves change and the raising of new perspectives. In the specific case of Clytemnestra, Fleishman’s and Farber’s representations of her underscore her relevance to the present, while simultaneously undermining the notion of any discreet universal denotation. In other words, through their “variations on Clytemnestra,” they establish a cross-temporal relation between antiquity and the present, a relation that both illuminates and challenges Clytemnestra’s traditional representation.

In Fleishman’s tragedy, like Aeschylus’, Orestes and Elektra murder Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, but Farber’s story has a different outcome. This is another way to show that the migration of antiquity to the present extends beyond the mere resituating of universal myths. Early in the play, despite the many accusations and shouts of hatred, some hope for reconciliation is expressed when Elektra and Klytemnestra attempt to acknowledge each other’s humanity. Despite her passionate feelings of revenge, Elektra acknowledges her mother’s hurt: “I see your heart mama/ I know it hurts” (19). Klytemnestra, though hesitantly and euphemistically, expresses a murmur of remorse: “I am not so exceedingly glad at the deeds I have done . . .” (20). Aegisthus (here Ayesthus, represented by a large worker’s uniform hanging on a washing line) is killed, but when Orestes is ready to murder Klytemnestra, the chorus’ singing makes him change his mind, after which he urges Elektra to “walk away.

Rewrite this ancient end!” (57). When Elektra, not yet ready to relinquish her vengeance, grabs the axe and runs towards Klytemnestra, the chorus overpowers her and comforts her as she weeps. The ancient end has been rewritten: Farber’s Klytemnestra lives.

Not only is Aeschylus’ trilogy rewritten, but also South Africa’s (his)story of violence, though residues of revenge remain:

*It falls softly the residue of revenge . . . like rain.
And we who made the sons and daughters of this
Land . . . Servants in the halls of their forefathers . . .
We know.
We are still only here by grace alone.
Look now—dawn is coming.
Great chains on the home are falling off.
This house rises up.
For too long it has lain in ash on the ground. (59)*

No family resolve, no love can be regained here; no forgiveness can be articulated. But the fact that the children help their mother to her feet and let her walk away signals the beginning of a process of forgiveness, a difficult process because, as Farber writes, “notions of a Rainbow Nation gliding effortlessly into forgiveness are absurd” (Director’s note). Farber has her reasons for making the chorus the main agent in breaking the cycle of revenge, because according to her: “it was not the gods or deus ex machina that delivered us from ourselves in the years following democracy, but the common everyman and woman . . . who lit the way for us all” (Director’s note).

Though both Fleishman and Farber end their plays on an optimistic note, with revenge giving way to new beginnings and possibilities, none of their characters explicitly articulate forgiveness. This is especially striking since forgiveness came to occupy a prominent position in the TRC’s political narrative of reconciliation. Indeed, as Wilson states, the TRC hearings were structured in such a way that any expression of a desire for revenge would seem out of place, so that it is questionable to what extent victims were given the choice to *not* forgive (2001, 17).¹¹ The emphasis on a Christian understanding of forgiveness had much to do with the influence of Church leaders, in particular the chairman of the commission, Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Still, the TRC was never intended to be a religious institution, so that there is something unsettling about the way in which the narrative of the TRC, a secular governmental institution, displayed tensions between a legal-political and a religious-redemptive understanding of truth and reconciliation (Shore and Kline 2006, 312).¹² Though the Christian message appealed to Christian South Africans, it excluded people of other

religious persuasions, and the absence of a Christian message in Farber's and Fleishman's plays may be seen as a comment on this shortcoming.¹³

To refer to forgiveness in the context of political reconciliation seems essentially flawed, as it relocates a moral and personal discourse into the political realm. The essence of forgiveness, after all, is that one can only forgive on behalf of oneself, not somebody else, let alone groups of people. Still, there may be a place for forgiveness in politics, perhaps because it is located at the threshold between the private and the public. For Hannah Arendt, although some things are unforgivable, forgiveness is a necessity of (political) life, because without being forgiven, "our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever" (1958, 237). Arendt seems to view forgiveness in a rather pragmatic way, as an act that frees us from the past.

Jacques Derrida also deals with the relation between forgiveness and politics. His essay "On Forgiveness" centers on the dual nature of forgiveness, the tension between what he describes as an "unconditional forgiveness" and a "conditional forgiveness proportionate to the recognition of the fault" (2001, 34–35). In his view, forgiveness "is not, it *should not be*, normal, normative, normalizing. It *should* remain exceptional and extraordinary, in the face of the impossible: as if it interrupted the ordinary course of historical temporality"; consequently, forgiveness "does not, it should never amount to a therapy of reconciliation," because this implies the intervention of a third party within what should essentially be a one-to-one relationship between victim and perpetrator (2001, 31–32; 41). Michael Janover finds Derrida's idea of a pure forgiveness "charming and persuasive" in a world in which "forgiveness can be traded and reduced to a mechanism for winning votes or allies in a world in which amnesty for former mass murderers and tyrants can be decided by political ideals" (2007, 228). However, Janover does not take into account that even when forgiveness is subsumed within the personal and moral realm, it remains difficult to conceive of its unconditional form. Even in the most private context, forgiveness is never delimited to the confines of a one-to-one relationship between perpetrator and victim, as it is always informed by a complex mixture of personal, social, and political factors. In Farber, the important role of the community in putting an end to the cycle of vengeance illustrates this well.

Perhaps the problem with the TRC was not so much that the commission drew on a personal and moral concept of forgiveness within a political sphere, but rather that forgiveness was given such a dominant position that it left victims little room to avoid or renounce it. Moreover, there appears to have been little awareness of the fact that to *state* forgiveness, because one wishes or because one feels forced to, does not automatically mean that the *act* of forgiveness actually takes place. For there is always that other mediating institution that Derrida mentions in passing: language (2001, 42).

The Politics of Reconciliation

While forgiveness occupied a prominent position within the TRC, amnesty, often understood as the institutionalization and collectivization of forgiveness, was never directly linked to forgiveness, but instead to truth. Truth (“full disclosure”) would pave the way towards reconciliation.¹⁴ The TRC was the first truth commission that linked amnesty to the uncovering of the truth and the first to be given the mandate to free perpetrators from civil and criminal prosecution for the rest of their lives (Cole 2007, 174). Traditionally, amnesty suggests a collective forgetting of past wrongs and a wish to break clean from the past; indeed, in ancient Greek, amnesty and amnesia are two meanings of same word. The TRC, however, associated amnesty with anamnesis rather than amnesia (Schaap 2005, 113). It emphasized the importance of recollecting the past so that through “truth” it would become possible to achieve reconciliation. In other words, it attempted to settle between what Parry describes as the competing claims of reconciliation and remembrance (2004, 183).

The emphasis on truth meant that applicants for amnesty were not asked to publicly apologize and ask for forgiveness, but solely to state their crimes and to show how these crimes were political in nature. As Willie Henderson explains, granting freedom in exchange for truth involves the danger that truth may become a mere commodity and, as such, be stripped of its ethical impact (2000, 459). Indeed, it makes it impossible to separate applicants’ motivation to tell the truth from the coercive lure of exoneration. For Wole Soyinka, the main problem with South Africa’s choice for amnesty is its “implicit, *a priori* exclusion of criminality and, thus, responsibility” (1999, 31). His concern is understandable, though probably the imperative that they subscribe to the position of “perpetrator” in order to apply for amnesty, and the requirement that they admit their crimes in public, did force many perpetrators to take responsibility. But taking responsibility implies sincerity and sincerity is difficult to judge. Moon discusses, for instance, how former security policeman Jeffrey Benzien (referred to earlier as the inventor of the “Wet Bag” torture method) wittingly manipulated the TRC narrative of reconciliation.¹⁵ Ingrid de Kok’s doubt as to whether structures dedicated to reconciliation and unity might not still “unwittingly encourage social and cultural amnesia” is certainly legitimate (qtd. in Parry 2004, 109).

Fleishman dramatizes part of the amnesty debate in the final scene of his *In the City of Paradise*. The question is asked whether Orestes and Electra should be convicted for their matricide or granted amnesty instead. Among the furies in gas masks that begin to hound them are Tyndareus and Leda, Clytemnestra’s parents, two characters that do not figure in Aeschylus. Fleishman introduces another generation of people who have been involved in and affected by the violence.¹⁶ Despite his grief and anger about his daughter’s death, Tyndareus stops the mob from stoning Orestes and Electra, persuading them that “we seek not private vengeance here, but public

retribution/ Justice will win out/ Our time will come” (37). He urges them to replace vengeance with legal action, but his call is not answered. Instead, the court herald announces, speaking lines that are almost identical to those of the 1995 Truth and Reconciliation Act,

*... we stand today upon an historic bridge
Between a past of deep division and discord,
And a brighter future of peace and prosperity for all.
There is a need for understanding, not for vengeance,
For forgiveness not retaliation,
For humanity not for victimization.
Our learned judges, seek to reconcile all differences,
To set aside all enmity and hatred,
To build anew our fragile lives in Argos.
They decree, therefore, that amnesty shall be granted
In respect of acts, omissions and offences
Committed in the cause of conflicts of the past,
Where a full disclosure of the facts are made,
Lest we forget our brutal heritage. (38)*

Despite Tyndareus’ outrage at the decision to grant amnesty to his daughter’s murderers, the final image presents the TRC’s amnesty arrangement as an imperfect but necessary tool for democracy. This move away from Tyndareus’ personal pain illustrates how, in the process of the TRC, the attention moved away from the personal towards the national. But Tyndareus’ complaint that “this amnesty pollutes our law” and that it is a “travesty of justice” remains important and echoes the opinion of many victims of apartheid, who felt that the amnesty provisions denied them the right to seek judicial redress (39).¹⁷ Indeed, victims were given no opportunity to opt for a kind of closure other than the reconciliatory one promoted by the TRC.

The rhetoric of the TRC linked amnesty to an idea of transitional or restorative justice, a justice that did not imply vengeance or retribution. The opposition between a restorative and a retributive justice came to be identified as the opposition between Africa and the West.¹⁸ Wilson argues that the creation of a polarity between a romanticized “African” idea of reconciliation (founded on the notion of *ubuntu*, the Nguni word referring to “humaneness”) and a Western notion of retributive justice (implying vengeance) closed down space for discussing legal punishment as a possible route to reconciliation (2001, 11). According to him, *ubuntu* thus became an “ideological concept with multiple meanings which conjoins human rights, restorative justice, reconciliation and nation-building within the populist language of pan-Africanism,” the “Africanist wrapping used to sell a reconciliatory version of human rights talk to black

South Africans. *Ubuntu* belies the claim that human rights would have no culturalist or ethnic dimensions” (2001, 13). In other words, it was implied that if you were truly African, there had to be forgiveness in your heart.¹⁹

The debate about the TRC’s amnesty arrangement points to the inevitable clash in post-conflict societies between different understandings of and different demands on justice. Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* dramatizes this. Throughout the trilogy, Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Apollo, Orestes, and the Erinyes (the Furies, spirits of wrath) all claim justice on their side, but their different understandings and rhetorical appropriations of justice differ and compete violently. At Orestes’ trial, a confrontation takes place mainly between his defender Apollo, who has instructed Orestes to kill his mother to avenge his father’s death because justice so demands, and the Erinyes, who want Orestes to pay with his blood for the matricide he has committed. Aeschylus demonstrates not only that justice lacks a fixed meaning but also that its possible meanings depend on the political interests at stake. The *Eumenides*, the tragedy that concludes the *Oresteia*, dramatizes a reconciliatory process between the different demands of different ideas of justice, culminating in the celebration of Athena’s judicial court that puts an end to vengeance and instead installs a judicial system based on evidence and trial.

The reconciliation Athena achieves depends primarily on her power to convince the Erinyes to take their place within the new Athens as the Eumenides, the Kindly Ones. They are not banished, nor are their passions for vengeance denied. Rather, in their new function, they will embody “that ultimate sanction of fear which underlies the new order, as it dominated the old” (Vellacott, Aeschylus 1956, 20). By transforming “murderous begetting into blessed fecundity,” to use Nicole Loraux’s words, Athena attempts to compromise between the demands of the past and those of the future (2006, 38). The Furies, once transformed into the Kindly Ones and officially incorporated within the new order, will protect the city rather than endanger its inner stability. Athena’s mediation signifies the inauguration of a new social and political order; one in which the old is not simply discarded, but reconciled with the new. At least, that would be the official story.

Traditionally, the *Oresteia* is seen as a celebration of democracy and the expression of a progressive movement from chaos to order. Christopher Rocco lists a number of such interpretations, among them the one by the renowned classicist John H. Finley who, in Rocco’s words, saw the trilogy as “nothing less than a founding document of Western civilization” (1997, 144).²⁰ In Froma Zeitlin’s feminist reading of the *Oresteia*, what is actually founded is a tradition of misogynistic exclusion, since the “solution” or reconciliation of the *Eumenides* entails the hierarchization of values: the subordination of the Furies to the Olympians, of barbarian to Greek and, most important for Zeitlin, of female to male (Rocco 1997, 144). When the judges of her court fail to cast a final vote, Athena’s mediation indeed displays a great amount of

gender politics. She votes in favor of Orestes because the murder of Clytemnestra (woman/mother) is less important than that of Agamemnon (man/father):

*No mother gave me birth. Therefore the father's claim
And male supremacy in all things, save to give
Myself in marriage, wins my whole heart's loyalty.
Therefore a woman's death, who killed her husband, is,
I judge, outweighed in grievousness by his. (Aeschylus 1956, 172)²¹*

Just before her vote, Apollo has similarly argued for the supremacy of fatherhood over motherhood, stating that the mother is “not the true parent of the child” but only “the nurse who tends the growth/ Of young seed planted by its true parent, the male” (Aeschylus 1956, 169). Athena’s final judgment, then, is far from impartial and Zeitlin is right that, as Rocco rephrases it, “through the democratic rhetoric of equality, reason and consent legitimate the institutionalization of exclusionary polarities into systematized hierarchies, rather than creating a truly democratic order” (1997, 144). The problem of justice is not solved; rather, one version of justice is privileged over other possible versions.²²

In South Africa, a similar thing happened. Here, too, the new democracy that was created did not, and still does not, correspond with the reality of the majority of the people. Here, too, one understanding of justice, as reconciliation, was privileged, leaving little room for a retributionist discourse. Maybe justice as reconciliation did best serve the nation-building project; after all, in the new South Africa, people had to find ways to live together and move beyond sentiments that might jeopardize their joint future. At the same time, while the “re” in “reconciliation” assumes that there was something in common that can be reconciled, as journalist Antjie Krog writes in her book about the TRC, “in this country, there is nothing to go back to, no previous state or relationship one would wish to restore. In these stark circumstances, ‘reconciliation’ does not even seem like the right word, but rather ‘conciliation’” (2000, 143). Maybe Wilson is right that the TRC’s effort to “forge a new moral vision of the nation,” centering on forgiveness and reconciliation, ultimately “destroys the most important promise of human rights; that is, its possible contribution to a thoroughgoing transformation of an authoritarian criminal justice system and the construction of real and lasting democratic legitimacy” (2001, 230). At this time in history, it is difficult to assess the advantages and disadvantages of the TRC’s project of reconciliation.

And so, just as Athena’s mediation is imperfect and ambiguous, so the TRC’s mediation inevitably entailed sacrifice and loss. Just as the new order that Athena establishes remains precarious, so post-apartheid, democratic South Africa finds itself in a similarly precarious and fragile state. The *Oresteia* dramatizes this complexity. In Rocco’s reading, the trilogy, despite its triumphant ending, “constructs the

meaning of the democratic founding, and so of democracy itself, as open to further contest, struggle, and renegotiation” (1997, 169). Similarly, J.G. Finlayson states that, rather than simply instructing how reconciliation can and should be achieved,

It is as if Aeschylus is telling us that justice, reason, and lawfulness are not established facts that need merely be recognized for what they are by an act of theoretical contemplation but ongoing practical tasks within the new social order, and reconciliation between the different ethical powers, between citizens and their new institutions is not a state already attained but an ongoing process. (1999, 516)

Democracy will forever have to be critically reexamined and renegotiated. Reconciliation, despite the finality that the word suggests, can never really achieve a point of closure. The TRC did realize this, which is evident from the recommendations it gave to the new government on how to recompense victims (Final Report VI 1998, 726–732). The commission was aware that its years of active practice were to be only the beginning of a long and difficult process, and the failure of the government to adequately proceed with this process greatly discredits its intention of instigating long-lasting societal change.²³

Epilogue

Importantly, the Furies not only represent the spirit of revenge, but also the imperative to remember evil. As Booth states, in societies undergoing the transition to democracy this “weight of the claims of the past and their clash with those of the present and future, are most visible” (2001, 777–778). By accepting Athena’s offer to be institutionalized within the new order, the Furies—now the Kindly Ones—not only become the protectors of the city but of memory as well. If we understand memory as a cultural phenomenon, as Bal suggests, the Kindly Ones could be seen as agents of “cultural memorization,” an activity “occurring in the present, in which the past is continuously modified and redescribed even as it continues to shape the future” (Bal, Crewe, and Spitzer 1999, vii). As the embodiment of memory, then, they have to fulfill the demands of both past and future within the present, a difficult and dangerous task, because the line between keeping alive the past and paralyzing the present is thin. It is on this thin line that the Kindly Ones perform their balancing act.

One may wonder what has happened to the Furies in post-apartheid South Africa. Though the dominant discourse of forgiveness denied them an official place within what was to be the new democratic “rainbow” nation of South Africa, they undoubtedly still roam beneath the surface, fighting their fight against forgetting. After all, memories cannot simply be relegated to the past but, instead, must actively be acknowledged and sustained within the present and, more specifically, within the ongoing process of reconciliation.

Fleishman and Farber dramatize the start of what will be a long process and emphasize the demands of the future, but their most important contribution is that

they restore focus to the personal, the private realm of personal suffering, by inviting their audience to continue considering the individual stories that are involved. Both playwrights seem intent on helping the Furies in their fight to remember. Farber brings the TRC back to life, not the national narrative it helped to construct, but the specificity of the personal stories that it originally revealed; stories that now, almost a decade after the TRC's final report was published, have acquired an almost archival status. By returning to the performative aspect of the hearings, she reverses the transition from oral testimony to written narrative, from performance to text. Fleishman's most important contribution is that he reactivates the debate about what transitional justice actually entails, the advantages but also the losses. He too calls attention to the individual people involved, inviting his audience to consider those for whom forgiveness remains impossible and for whom the amnesty arrangement remains an unacceptable sacrifice. Both playwrights demonstrate that, in post-apartheid South Africa, theater is an important complementary practice. Because, as Fleishman says, theater is able to make absences present again, to keep the past alive within the present, and to connect the past to the yet unfulfilled future (2007b).

But in South Africa, this future is difficult to imagine, and Parry may be right in stating that it has been jeopardized by an inadequate dealing with the past. The TRC's intention to create a shared point of origin in history from which the entire nation could depart as one has not succeeded; how could it in a country where the former apartheid government had done everything in its power to divide rather than unite? In this light, it is both interesting and discouraging to view Tutu's and Mandela's emphasis on reconciling the nation and on establishing a non-racial democracy in relation to the racialized discourse that has become more and more predominant under Thabo Mbeki's and Jacob Zuma's presidencies. The main challenge for South African artists today is to create new sites where the battle over the past can be fought free from the impediment of nationalist, racist, or nativist ideologies. A space where people can really come to terms with history, not as the objects of historical representation, but as the subjects of *their* histories. A space where the competing claims of remembrance and reconciliation can be involved in a continuously productive struggle.

Notes

1. The trilogy's first two parts dramatize a Homeric understanding of justice as vengeance: in *Agamemnon*, the king of Argos returns from Troy and is murdered by his wife Clytemnestra in revenge for the sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia; in the *Libation Bearers*, their children Electra and Orestes avenge Agamemnon's death by killing Clytemnestra. In the final part, the *Eumenides*, however, Athena establishes a judicial court so that Orestes can be legally tried for matricide.
2. Both plays are unpublished. I thank Mark Fleishman and Yael Farber for making the scripts available to me.
3. Personal correspondence, 9 January 2008.
4. Final Report I (1998, 110); Mistry (2001, 3–4); Sanders (2001, 18). As Megan Shore and Scott Kline note, it is remarkable that it was not until the final report was published that the TRC publicly acknowledged that it had been working with these four definitions of truth (2006, 313).
5. Ricoeur further explains that this process is reciprocal, because only through their inscription into history do people's testimonies become accepted and validated (2004, 184).
6. Brent Harris illustrates how the interruption of commissioners sometimes restricted the narrative of the past. He refers, for instance, to a hearing in which a testifier recounted the sexual abuse of female recruits by ANC camp commanders in Angola but was asked to "confine yourself to the things that have happened to you and what you did" (2000, 129). This shows that often little or no room was given to unexpected and additional narratives that exceeded the ones pre-set for the particular hearings.
7. Fiona C. Ross explains that most women who testified at the hearings mainly spoke of men's suffering and only addressed their own experiences indirectly (2003, 5).
8. The wet bag method consisted of tying a man down and placing a wet bag over his face to suffocate him. It was developed by former security policeman Jeffrey Benzien, who explained its workings at a TRC amnesty hearing (see Moon 2006, 271).
9. Farber's presentation of Klytemnestra as the only white character highlights this. When the audience members see her abuse Elektra, they are invited to understand her as the representative of apartheid ideology. The portrayal of Klytemnestra as the object of abuse herself may do more than complicate the perpetrator/victim opposition; it brings up the danger of implying that mitigating circumstances reduce the extent to which Klytemnestra can be held accountable for her acts.
10. This does not automatically mean race was absent from performances of this text.
11. Some victims later complained they had felt expected to forgive their perpetrators. See the report on survivors' perceptions of the TRC by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation between August 7, 1997 and February 1, 1998: www.csvr.org.za/papers/papkhul.htm
12. "It is interesting," Tutu himself admits in his memoir *No Future Without Forgiveness*, "that the President appointed an Archbishop as Chairperson of the Commission and not, for instance, a judge, since we were to some extent a quasi-judicial body" (1999, 71).
13. Fleishman's title *In the City of Paradise* does contain a religious reference, but its effect seems mostly ironic: this city is far from paradise, nor is paradise presented as an achievable goal.
14. As discussed previously, the TRC defined this truth pluralistically.
15. For an analysis of Benzien's testimony, see Moon (2006, 271–272) and Krog (2000, 93–99).
16. Tyndareus does play a prominent role in Euripides' *Orestes*.

17. Family members of the murdered anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko, for example, together with other survivors of murdered activists, filed a lawsuit against the TRC, claiming that the amnesty arrangement was unconstitutional, as it denied them the individual right to judicial redress. The Constitutional Court rejected the claim and ruled that amnesty in exchange for truth neither violated the constitution nor the Geneva Convention (Minow 1998, 56).

18. Tutu argued, for example, that the notion of a retributive justice is largely Western and that the African understanding is “far more restorative, not so much to punish as to redress or restore a balance that has been knocked askew” (qtd. in Minow 1998, 81).

19. Wilson claims that this rhetoric of reconciliation forms a great discrepancy with the judicial practice in township courts, where people “look back at the past and still feel the burden of a crime that has not been cancelled by punishment,” an adherence to a continuity with the past that is “dangerous to the new and fragile nation-building project: the new historicity of a reconciling political elite” (2001, 209).

20. For other such progressivist readings of the *Oresteia*, see E.R. Dodds (1960) and H.D.F. Kitto (1956).

21. The first line refers to Athena’s birth from Zeus’s thigh.

22. As Simon Goldhill states, the great variety of interpretations of the *Oresteia* in itself demonstrates that the problem of justice is not solved: the language of justice (*dike*), “twisted and turned by the rhetoric of appropriation in the *Oresteia*, can be read only by a further act of appropriation—the critic’s own rhetoric” (1986, 55–56).

23. Thabo Mbeki (president from 1999–2008) did not follow up on the TRC’s recommendations to start a long-term reparations program for victims of apartheid, and to install a corporate tax (directed at corporations that benefited from apartheid) to help fund this program. Nor have the successive post-apartheid governments managed to instigate significant societal change and properly address South Africa’s most pressing problems: poverty, unemployment, and AIDS.

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