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The politics of adaptation: contemporary African drama and Greek tragedy

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CHAPTER 4

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

In the face of the strength of the theatre of the Commission ... how can any of us working in the theatre compete with it? Of course we can't and don't try to... Our theatre is a reflection on the debate rather than the debate itself. It tries to make sense of the memory rather than be the memory.

—William Kentridge

Ho laphal'igazi.
[blood has been spilt here]

—Yael Farber, *Molora*

In the previous two chapters, I discussed plays that adapt Greek tragedy to dramatise political conflict and change. In the second half of this study, I shift focus to adaptations that deal with the aftermath of change. This entails entering the realm of memory and history. Yet, the emphasis remains on the present, in which both memory and history are at work, and on the future they construct. In the previous chapters I was particularly interested in the ways in which playwrights mobilise Greek tragedy as a political tool and the ways in which they challenge conventional ideas about Greek tragedy. I focused, in short, on how tragedy is used politically, both to inspire change and to perform politics. In the following discussions I examine the ways in which playwrights turn to Greek tragedy to explore the costs and consequences of political transition. In other words, I move from a discussion of “tragedy and change” to a discussion of “the tragedy of change,” considering how Greek tragedy offers ways not only to perform, but also to theorise politics.

In the present chapter, I focus on two dramatic texts that rework Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy within and into the context of post-apartheid South Africa. Mark Fleishman's *In the City of Paradise* premiered at the University of Cape Town in 1998 as a collaborative production with his drama students, who also formed the cast. Yael Farber's *Molora* (Sesotho for "ash") was first performed at the Grahamstown National Arts Festival in 2003 and published in 2008.¹ Like Osofisan's *Women of Owu*, these plays not only dramatise the losses and compromises that haunt post-conflict societies, but also highlight their challenge to come to terms with the past and move forward. In my analysis of *Molora* and *In the City of Paradise*, I consider the political transition from apartheid to post-apartheid South Africa in relation to the cultural exchange between antiquity and the present, highlighting the politics involved in cross-temporal migration. This focus directs me to a number of interrelated topics, ranging from storytelling to theatre, from memory to justice, from truth to forgiveness and from amnesty to reconciliation.

Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, the only full trilogy of Greek tragedies known to us today, is based on the ancient myth of the house of Atreus. Although it is set in the aftermath of the Trojan War, the trilogy in all likelihood held considerable contemporary relevance when it was first performed at the Dionysia festival in 458 BC, marking the transition of Athens from a tribal culture ruled by customs to a democratic society governed by constitutional law (Ziolkowski 1977: 20). The trilogy's first two parts dramatise a Homeric understanding of justice, in which justice is equated with 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 trilogy's final part, the *Eumenides*, however, the definition of justice changes. Athena establishes a judicial court so that Orestes can be legally tried for matricide. When the judges are unable to decide Orestes' fate, Athena casts the final vote herself, securing Orestes' acquittal. Throughout the *Oresteia* Aeschylus dramatises the political deployment of justice, concluding his trilogy positively with the inauguration of legal justice in Athens' new democracy.²

The two plays I discuss present political adaptations of the *Oresteia* within another context of transitional justice: post-apartheid South Africa. They dramatise the challenges South Africa faced after the end of apartheid: how to move beyond

¹ *Molora* has also played for European and American audiences (Aktina Stathaki 2009: 125). Although this chapter is based on the published text, my initial analysis was based on the unpublished script and I wish to thank Yael Farber for making this available to me. I also thank Mark Fleishman for allowing me to use the script of his unpublished *In the City of Paradise*.

² It is worth considering how our modern understanding of Greek tragedy would be different if more trilogies were known to us today, since the conventional view of tragedy as a dramatic form that ends infelicitously rests primarily on single tragedies, rather than the trilogies they were part of.

vengeance, how to reconcile a nation torn apart by decades of injustice, and how to change a system of apartheid into a non-racial democracy? In their adaptations, both Farber and Fleishman make explicit reference to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), established in 1995 to avoid the bloodshed that was expected after apartheid officially ended and to facilitate the transition to a new democratic nation.

In both *Molora* and *In the City of Paradise*, the distorted family relations within the house of Atreus represent the distorted relations within South Africa. Other South African plays employ the myth of Atreus as well. In 1971, Athol Fugard produced *Orestes*, in which he mixed the myth of Orestes with the story of John Harris, an anti-apartheid protester who in 1964 left a bomb on a bench in the Johannesburg Railway Station, killing one woman and wounding twenty-three people (see McDonald 2006: 23-29). Tug Yurgrau's *The Song of Jacob Zulu*, a collaborative project with the choral group Ladysmith Black Mambazo which premiered in Chicago in 1992, also draws on the myth of Orestes, telling the story of the young black student Jacob and his involvement with anti-apartheid politics. With reference to *Molora* Farber explains:

Forced to live as a servant in the halls of her own father's house, Elektra waits for her brother Orestes to return from exile to the land of his ancestors and take back what is rightfully theirs. The premise of this ancient story was striking to me as a powerful canvas on which to explore the history of dispossession, violence and human-rights violations in the country I grew up in. ... *Molora* is an examination of the spirals of violence begat by vengeance, and the breaking of such cycles by the ordinary man. (7-8)

Farber accounts for the relevance of the myth of the house of Atreus to post-apartheid South Africa. However, the use of a family metaphor within a context in which people were forced into submission also presents problems. It entails the danger of casting colonial history as a story featuring civilising parents and submissive children, and moreover suggests an original moment of primordial unity. As Aktina Stathaki contends in her dissertation on post-apartheid adaptations of Greek tragedy, a family metaphor represents history in simple terms: "an initial bond breaks, a period of enmity ensues and in the end the bond is restored" (2009: 173).

Both Farber's and Fleishman's plays suggest such a past unity. For example, when Farber's Elektra tells her mother Klytemnestra, "You loved me once, I think./ You loved my brother—and you loved me..." or when Fleishman's Clytaemnestra tells her son Orestes, "I remember the milky smell of your skin against mine,/ the way a lock of your hair would fall across your forehead...I love you Orestes. I gave birth to you" (26, 42, 28). Instead of depicting an idealised family picture, however, both playwrights adjust the family metaphor to include a history of oppression and violence. Farber's Klytemnestra reveals that she only became Agamemnon's wife by brute force. Fleishman's Clytaemnestra has a similar story to tell about Agamemnon, "[w]ho spent

more time away from home/ than ever he spent time in it” and whose “sudden and brutish returns/ terrified the children and the servants” (30). In this house, Fleishman’s Cassandra relates, “parents eat their little children” and “fill their hands with their own flesh” (1). The narratives reveal that this was never the home of a happy family.³

In this chapter, I analyse the ways in which Farber’s and Fleishman’s adaptations of the *Oresteia* dramatise various aspects of the TRC. In the first section, I focus on the role of storytelling in both the plays and the Commission’s hearings. Narrative offers valuable ways of uncovering, commemorating and mourning loss. However, as the playwrights demonstrate, it is important to acknowledge the limits and implications of these processes. I then turn to the distinction between victim and perpetrator, which structured and guided the TRC process but which, as Farber’s and Fleishman’s refigurations of Clytemnestra, Electra and Orestes demonstrate, is not always easy to uphold. The third section examines the ways in which the commission’s ideal endpoint of national reconciliation relied on the staging of a direct relation between acts of revealing and personal and national healing. I reconsider the TRC’s shift from private testimony to public discourse and its theatrical nature. After this, I focus on forgiveness and amnesty, both on how they are deployed by the respective playwrights and how they appeared during the TRC process. I conclude by turning to the final part of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* trilogy, the *Eumenides*, for further consideration of what reconciliation implies and entails.

NARRATING THE PAST

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was the result of negotiations between Nelson Mandela’s African National Congress (ANC) and F.W. de Klerk’s National Party (NP), which culminated in the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act. The act advocated “a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for ubuntu but not for victimization,” and defined the TRC’s mandate and objectives. The work of the TRC was divided into three committees. The Human Rights Violations Committee investigated the human rights violations that occurred between 1960 and 1994, and organised hearings in which victims and perpetrators publicly told their stories, bringing out in the open what had remained hidden. The Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee was in charge of

³ Fleishman uses the Latin transliteration for his characters (Clytaemnestra and Electra), while Farber uses the Greek (Klytemnestra and Elektra). When I write about Fleishman’s and Farber’s specific characters, I use the transliteration of their choice. In my general references, I use the Latin transliteration and refer to “Clytemnestra,” as this is the spelling conventionally used in English.

restoring the dignity of the victims and with formulating proposals for rehabilitation and restoration. Finally, the Amnesty Committee considered applications for amnesty.⁴

As its name implies, the TRC was intended to achieve reconciliation by uncovering the truths about the past and by developing a shared memory. The scope of this project can only be grasped by reflecting on the structural forgetfulness that had inflicted apartheid South Africa. As cultural anthropologist Allen Feldman explains, different factors had created a “public culture of knowledge fragmentation and provisional memory, which overlaid a dense mosaic of privatized memories and local knowledge, informalized oral culture, and cults of secrecy in both white and black communities”; all of which was the effect of “information stratification by race, class, locale, mendacity, and archives of secrecy” (2004: 173).⁵ Despite the difficulties and compromises involved, the TRC’s intention to reveal what for so long had remained hidden was groundbreaking. The belief that people would be healed by revealing their stories, resulting in the healing of the entire nation, was idealistically and ideologically informed. After all, without some preliminary sense of national healing and reconciliation it was difficult to imagine the transition to a democratic South Africa. By referring to personal healing, national healing and national reconciliation as exchangeable and mutually reinforcing concepts, the TRC created a language in which the discourses of psychotherapy and politics became conflated.

Both Fleishman and Farber write from a post-TRC perspective, portraying the human rights violations that the hearings have brought to light, as well as addressing a thematic of truth, justice, forgiveness and amnesty. Fleishman sets his play in and around the palace where Clytaemnestra, years after her murder of her husband Agamemnon, lives with her new husband Aegisthus. The allusions to apartheid are abundant: Aegisthus is violent, corrupt and drunk and walks around with two secret service agents. He “issues a state of emergency,” declaring “special powers to search and to seize; to detain and punish those who seek to wreck our quiet lives” and he has Cassandra arrested for spray-painting Orestes’ name (thus foretelling his

⁴ See the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/rsa/act95_034.htm>, accessed 5 August 2008. The TRC held hearings over a period of six years in which it collected 21,000 individual submissions to the Human Rights Violations Committee and over 7,000 submissions to the Amnesty committee (Feldmann 2004: 174). Its proceedings were published in a final report. I discuss the term *ubuntu*, the Nguni word for “humaneness,” below.

⁵ Feldman writes that “the fragmentation of public recollection was an institutionally manipulated effect that emanated from 1) the secret knowledge systems of the state; 2) the apartheid culture of deniability that extended from the upper echelons of apartheid’s ruling organs—government, armed forces, police services, and intelligence services—to the everyday class, racial, and geographic insularity of most white South Africans; 3) the spatial atomization of social knowledge imposed upon communities of color by apartheid’s geographical sequestration, race-based inequitable education system, and linguistic stratification; 4) the cultural decimation of violently urbanized rural populations; and 5) media censorship and deliberate disinformation campaigns” (2004: 172).

return to Argos) on the palace walls (13-14). Electra is “scarred by years of abuse and imprisonment”; Orestes too becomes the victim of extreme violence when Aegisthus rapes him (5, 21). Fleishman refers to the TRC in the final scene of the play when Clytaemnestra’s parents, Tyndareus and Leda, bring Electra and Orestes before the court. They seek retribution but are forced to accept the foundation of a TRC-like process, in which Electra and Orestes are granted amnesty in the spirit of reconciliation.

Farber makes more explicit reference to the TRC, instructing 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). The action of *Molora* is enclosed within the framework of a TRC hearing. 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. Klytemnestra, in turn, testifies to what she has done. In Aeschylus, Electra and Orestes kill their mother to avenge their father and reclaim their right to the throne. In Farber and Fleishman, it is suggested that the spiral of vengeance in which Electra and Orestes are caught, is the result of structural abuse.

In the first scene of *Molora*, titled “testimony,” Elektra and Klytemnestra face each other across two tables with microphones. By placing victim and perpetrator at one table, Farber conflates what in the TRC were two separate hearings for two different commissions, thus complicating a straightforward distinction between victim and perpetrator, something I expand on in the next section. The testimonies are witnessed by the Chorus, Xhosa women from the Ngqoko Cultural Group, who sing and play traditional instruments, such as mouth bows, calabash bows and milking drums (12).⁶ They sit along the back of the playing area, facing the audience, and are supposed to represent “the community that provided the context to this event” (19). Farber further instructs that her play should never be played on a raised stage, but on the floor with the audience “in front of, left and right of” and on the same level as the performance. Contact with the audience, she specifies, “must be immediate and dynamic, with the audience complicit—experiencing the story as witnesses or participants in the room” (19). South African poet, journalist and scholar Antjie Krog, who chronicled the TRC in her *Country of my Skull* (1998), explains that similar considerations about seating arrangements and staging played a role in the Commission’s hearings. She relates how in the first Amnesty Hearings, in the absence of the architecture of the courtroom, questions arose such as “where should the perpetrators sit? On the same raised level as the judges? And the victims? Down among the audience?” (2000: 78).

⁶ The chorus sing Umngqokolo, which refers to a style of singing in split-tones whereby two pitches are produced simultaneously. See David Dargie (1991).

After the Chorus' singing has ended, Klytemnestra pulls the microphone towards her and starts her testimony by confessing: "I did it all. I don't deny it" (22). In the present tense, she describes in detail how "at each stroke he cries in agony," how he "buckles at the knees and crashes here!" and how, "when he's down" she adds the third and final blow, after which "the life is bursting/ out of him—great sprays of blood" (23). Klytemnestra revels in what she has done:

And I...I revel like the Earth
 when the spring rains come down.
 The blessed gifts of God.
 And the new green spear splits the sheath
 and rips to birth in glory!
 Here lies Agamemnon my husband
 made a corpse by his right hand.
 A Masterpiece of Justice.
 Done is done. (23)

Although the "murderous shower wounds [her],/ dyes [her] black," Klytemnestra presents the execution of Agamemnon as legitimate on both religious and legal grounds: it evokes the "blessed gifts of God" and is a "Masterpiece of Justice." Her testimony points to a crucial aspect of the TRC process: perpetrators were asked to reveal what they had done and state the facts, but whether or not they would be given amnesty did not depend on any expression of remorse or guilt; amnesty was solely linked to truth, not remorse. I discuss the implications of this below.

The translator (the only male chorus member) interprets Klytemnestra's last line into Xhosa. As in the TRC hearings, Elektra and Klytemnestra are both allowed to tell their stories in their own languages.⁷ Elektra then pulls the microphone towards her; it is her turn to speak. She mixes her English with the Xhosa that, it is suggested, is her native language. The published text includes an English translation:

Ndingasiqala ngaphi isicengcelezo sam
 ngenkohlakalo yakho?
 [WITH WHICH OF YOUR EVILS SHALL I BEGIN MY RECITAL?]
 Kona, ndingayeka phi na?
 [WITH WHICH SHALL I END IT?]

⁷ Fleishman also alludes to the different languages spoken at the TRC. While most of his play is in English, in the opening scene Cassandra cries out in a mixture of English and Sesotho and the nurse and the infant Electra and Orestes sing in isiZulu (1). Under apartheid, South Africa only recognized English and Afrikaans as official languages; now the constitution also lists nine other official languages: Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, siSwati, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu. The latter four of these are Nguni languages, from which the term *ubuntu* derives. As found online <<http://www.info.gov.za/documents/constitution/1996/96cons1.htm>>, accessed 13 December 2010.

Zange ndayeka ukuyilungiselela into
 endandiya kuyithetha ebusweni bakho...
 [I HAVE NEVER CEASED TO REHEARSE WHAT I
 WOULD TELL YOU TO YOUR FACE...]
 If ever I were freed from my old terrors.
 And now I am.
 So I pay you back with these words
 I could not utter before:
 You were my ruin...
 Kodwa ndingakwenzanga nto.
 [YET I HAD DONE NOTHING TO YOU.]
 You poisoned me with your deeds.
 You are the shadow that fell on my life
 and made a child of me through fear.
 I have hated you for so long...
 And now you want to look into my heart?
 You who did this to my father will pay (24).

Electra does not so much speak to let Klytemnestra “look into [her] heart” and evoke feelings of sympathy or remorse, but rather to regain control. She confronts Klytemnestra with the power of one who is free to speak and who determines what is spoken and in what sequence. Elektra does not just *speak of* paying Klytemnestra back, her very speaking constitutes part of the payback.

The legal theorist Emilios A. Christodoulidis explains that speech can restore humanity in the confrontation between victim and perpetrator. Through positioning the tortured as addressee and seeking explanation for the first time from the torturer, the TRC established an ethical space, in which “the being-in-common might be projected. The space of ethics emerges, its possibility no longer negated” (2000: 181).⁸ In *Molora*, despite Elektra’s and Klytemnestra’s reciprocal violence, the possibility of a shared space is implied when they acknowledge each other as daughter and mother. “I see your heart mama./ I know it hurts,” Elektra says, to which Klytemnestra replies, though hesitantly and euphemistically, with a murmur of remorse: “I am not so exceedingly glad at the deeds I have done...” (42-43). However, throughout the play this shared space of mother and daughter continually withdraws as sentiments of vengeance take over.

Both Fleishman’s and Farber’s characters repeatedly insist on telling *their* stories, on conveying *their* subjective truths. Sometimes these stories can only be relayed through a particular form. In Fleishman, for example, Clytaemnestra chooses the genre of the

⁸ Yet, as Christodoulidis explains, this space can also easily withdraw, for example when a perpetrator’s action “reverts from from communicative to strategic” (2000: 181). He gives the hearing of police officer Jeffrey Benzien, to which I refer below, as an example.

fairy tale to explain to her son why she has killed Agamemnon, his father: “Once upon a time, in a land far, far away, there lived a weak and wicked king,” and “[s]o the old queen to protect her children, because she loved them so much, killed the evil king and his new wife [Cassandra] and grabbed the power of the kingdom so that she might raise her own children as kings” (28-29). The distanced, third person account makes it easier for Clytaemnestra to talk about her suffering. Primarily, though, the genre supplies the opportunity for her for once to talk to Orestes not as a perpetrator to her victim but as a mother to her child.

Speaking and telling, the characters in both plays try to come to terms with their traumatic pasts. Anthropologist Michael Jackson discusses how storytelling is crucial to re-empowerment because it enables victims of oppression to actively rework, rather than passively live, past experiences (2002: 15). Storytelling implies agency, the very agency victims have previously been denied. Narration can also be a means to relegate traumatic experiences to memory, because, as Bal states in a study on traumatic recall, only by being made “narratable” can traumatic events enter memory (Bal, Crewe and Spitzer 1999: x). As Bal emphasises, by entering memory events do not become a thing of the past, for memory is always actively at work in the present (vii). Cathy Caruth similarly argues that trauma can only be made comprehensible through language, adding that this placement of trauma in a narrative only becomes possible after a period of latency (1996: 3-7).

In the TRC process, the various testimonies were supposed to facilitate the process towards reconciliation by uncovering the past and by developing a shared national memory. Rosemary Jane Jolly argues that the terms “truth” and “shared memory” should not be understood here to refer to a monolithic version of the past, but to a heterogeneous construction that remains open to debate. The TRC assembled its narrative out of a wide range of stories by a variety of people, who were allowed to tell their story in their own words, rather than by being interrogated by committee members (2001: 701). At the same time, the conflict between Elektra/Electra and Klytemnestra/Clytaemnestra in *Molera* and *In the City of Paradise* demonstrate the difficulty that testimonies of the same experience do not always correspond. One event may generate a variety of often contradicting stories and truths. That truth can be endlessly contested is clear, for example, in the following exchange in *The City of Paradise*:

ELECTRA: It is not I who disgrace our family, mother.
 CLYTAEMNESTRA: Nor I, if truth be told.
 ELECTRA: Whose truth? What truth do you imagine
 ever spilt from between your guilty lips?
 The truth is plain: you killed my father! (8)

Electra's and Clytaemnestra's understandings of the truth remain diametrically opposed. Their conflicting "personal, narrative truths," to use the TRC's classification, will forever co-exist, a situation for which the TRC's framework, which emphasised multiple and subjective truths, explicitly allowed. This raises the question what meaning and value should be ascribed to the singular Truth of the commission's name.

The TRC privileged storytelling in its quasi-judicial Human Rights Violations hearings. Christodoulidis explains that while narrative inevitably remains distanced from the legal account of the law court, the TRC was steeped in law in every aspect of its working.⁹ He argues that the commission's dual nature as legal tribunal and public confessional made it schizophrenic: "that is its faultline and on that it stumbles. At every step, what the law brings to the process undercuts the infinitely delicate—and risky—process of reconciliation" (2000: 183). The law cannot "re-write collected memories as collective memory. Law cannot merge them into a narrative that a posteriori will do the job of ironing out the stark confrontations of narratives, the lived experiences of master and slave" (201). Perhaps the TRC privileged storytelling in its quasi-judicial Human Rights Violations hearings partly *because* it recognised this limit of the law. The commission explained that it recognised the healing potential of telling stories, that it understood that by telling their stories victims and perpetrators gave meaning to the "multi-layered experiences of the South African story," and that it considered the process to be "particularly important" in the "(South)African context, where value continues to be attached to oral tradition" (Final Report I 1998: 112).

According to literary scholar Mark Sanders this last 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 his opinion, the TRC's characterisation of storytelling as "subjective" implicitly situates it in opposition to the "factual evidence" that will be brought to light:

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. (21)

⁹ Not only did the TRC engage in "legal interpretations of key notions—'just ends, just means' and 'crime against humanity'; 'victim'; 'severe ill-treatment'; 'political context, political motivation'; 'accountability,'" it also enjoyed significant legal powers, such as "the power to issue subpoenas and force people before it, to compel witnesses' testimony; to decide on the admissibility of evidence; to authorise searches and seizures; to subpoena documents to grant amnesties" (Christodoulidis 2000: 186).

Sanders' criticism seems valid. By distancing the "personal, narrative truth" revealed through testimonies from the "factual or forensic truth" of the modern court of law, the TRC consigned people's experiences to a separate, pre-legal and pre-modern domain.¹⁰

The TRC distinguished "personal or narrative 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 of both individuals and the nation at large (Final Report I 1998: 110; Mistry 2001: 3-4; Sanders 2000: 18). It remained obscure how these four different notions of truth were considered to interrelate within the TRC process. Especially if accounts by victims and perpetrators were supposed to construct together *the* South African story, it seems problematic that the notions of truth that were employed in the hearings were so different from one another. At the same time, the co-existence of different types of discourses on truth suggests that the commission intended to generate different narratives that relate to, but also possibly contradict, one another, emphasising multiplicity and diversity. The TRC was aware that the story it sought to construct would remain fractured and that the singular "Truth" of its title required nuance. Indeed, in its final report the commission acknowledged that its narrative 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).¹¹

It is crucial to consider the ways in which the individual stories were framed by the hearings and the ways in which the hearings were highly mediated events. This mediation took place on various levels, 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 the 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 be broadcast and reach a wider audience. Perhaps most importantly, the space that was created for victims and perpetrators to tell their stories was state-authorised: the testimonies were incorporated within the discourse of the new state, concerned primarily with creating a shared point of origin from which a new nation could be erected. Mediation and framing influenced what was to become "the narrative," "the history" or "the public memory" of South Africa.

¹⁰ See also Sanders' book on "ambiguities of witnessing," where, arguing for the intersection of legal and literary discourses, he reads the TRC report in relation to contemporary South African literature (2007).

¹¹ Megan Shore and Scott Klein explain that 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. They also note that, remarkably, 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, 317).

VICTIMS AND PERPETRATORS

Storytelling can bestow storytellers with agency; yet, this agency is always conditional and mediated. Telling may be healing, but does not automatically constitute acts of liberation or empowerment. 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 even reaffirm, past inequalities. For example, some people may 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). Brent Harris illustrates how the interruptions by commissioners sometimes restricted the narrative of the past. He refers to a hearing in which a testifier recounted the sexual abuse of female recruits by ANC camp commanders in Angola and was asked to “confine yourself to the things that have happened to you and what you did” (2000: 129). There was not always room for unexpected and additional narratives that exceeded the ones pre-set for the hearings. Moreover, translations of the testimonies may alter the meaning of the initial utterances and are unable to preserve the non-verbal elements of the testimonies.

Another question is who tells the story and about whom. Here, gender is an important factor. A significant number of witnesses at the TRC hearings were women who, Feldman explains, represented not just themselves or their fragmented families, but “extensive networks of filiation” and who did not appear in front of the commission as victims, but as “representatives and embodied signifiers for the disappeared and the dead.” Their presence “and the shadows they brought into the hearing room, evoked the historical depth and recesses of their witness that could not be captured in literal speech” (2004: 176). The TRC venues offered women a place to represent and possibly also mourn their loved ones. Crucially, however, and I expand on this in the next chapter on mourning, the women’s identities exceed those of spokespersons for their lost ones. They too suffered. They too were victimised. Yet many women mainly spoke of men’s suffering and only addressed their own experiences indirectly (Ross 2003: 5).¹²

Feldman comments on the gendered hierarchy of suffering. In comparison to male activists, he explains, the women who endured constant police raids, who experienced the loss of their men and children and who had to care for their families under extremely difficult circumstances were frequently not viewed as victims of trauma

¹² Ross explains that because commission realised that if women did not recount their own stories its account would not be complete, it decided to hold “Special Hearings on Women” (as well as on children), so that “women” became a distinct subject category (2003: 23). Although the TRC thus became better equipped to draw attention to gendered forms of violation, like sexual violence, another effect of “essentialising suffering and gender in this way is to displace questions of resistance, class, race, age and cultural difference in the making of apartheid’s subjects and their remaking in the post-apartheid era” (23-25). See also Sanders’ chapter on “Hearing Women” (2007: 59-86).

(2004: 184). The classification of who counts as victim and who does not is of crucial significance. Because only crimes with a “political objective” were investigated, the countless people who had been economically exploited and victimised on a daily basis were not considered the victims of the apartheid state. The emphasis was on the political, but of course apartheid terror did not halt at people’s doorsteps. Moreover, victimhood was temporally confined as the TRC restricted itself to the human rights violations that were committed between March 1960 and December 1993.¹³

Unlike many women who spoke at TRC hearings, the suffering Farber’s and Fleishman’s *Elektra/Electra* and *Klytemnestra/Clytaemnestra* narrate is their own. Moreover, their stories are relayed to the audience directly, not mediated by commissioners’ interruptions or reinterpretations. They reveal structural abuse, so that the audience is led to understand why Farber’s *Elektra* desires “VENGEANCE!/ An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth!” and why Fleishman’s *Electra* similarly believes that “only violence can save us” (84; 19). Both playwrights show that violence begets violence, dramatising Nietzsche’s warning that “[w]hoever fights monsters should take care that in the process he does not become a monster” (1996: 98). Farber’s *Klytemnestra* knows that danger from her experience. Hence, she urges her daughter, who thinks that “[t]he night’s end is already written,” that “Nothing—nothing is written./ Do not choose to be me. The hounds that avenge all murder will forever hunt you down” (81-82).

Klytemnestra’s warning seems to be uttered 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: “I cannot fight my destiny. You have made me what I am!” (82). Orestes’ desperation over having turned into a perpetrator articulates a difficulty that arose in the TRC hearings. The distinction between perpetrator and victim was often blurred; some people were both perpetrator and victim at the same time (Sarkin 2004: 82). Sociologist Claire Moon discusses the way in which the subject categories of “victim” and “perpetrator” were central to the TRC’s performance of national reconciliation. The rituals of confession, forgiveness and remorse depended on a clear distinction between these categories, which were institutionalised through the

¹³ The first date coincides with the banning of political organisations and the Sharpeville Massacre, when in the township of Sharpeville, police opened fire on a crowd of black anti-pass law protesters, killing 67 and wounding 186 people. The end date was chosen as the date when Nelson Mandela was inaugurated (Final Report I 1998: 1). The time restriction means that the long history of racism and violence that preceded this period and pervaded South African society ever since Dutch settlers first arrived at the Cape in 1652, remained unchallenged, as well as the violence that occurred in the transition period after apartheid officially ended (Anthony Holiday 1998: 46). In the final report, the commission does include a chapter where the gross human rights violations that occurred under apartheid are put into political and historical perspective. There the commission acknowledges its limited time frame and the limited focus of its mandate (Final Report I 1998: 24-44).

discrete committees. Those testifying had to decide whether their submission would be a “victim” or a “perpetrator” submission (2006: 12, 267).¹⁴

In their plays, Fleishman and Farber underline the possible conflation of these two positions in their portrayal of Clytaemnestra/Klytemnestra as both abuser and victim. In Fleishman, Clytaemnestra tells her daughter that she should “learn the facts first” and then recounts the loss of her daughter Iphigenia and the shame she felt when Agamemnon, portrayed here not as a noble, troubled king but as a brutish, terrifying tyrant, brought his concubine Cassandra into her house. In Farber, Klytemnestra 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). Clytaemnestra/Klytemnestra has her own stories of injustice to tell. She is traumatised as well.

Fleishman and Farber not only challenge the binary of perpetrator and victim, but they also show that these categories cannot be distinguished along racial lines. Nonetheless, it is important to emphasise that violence in South Africa *was* racialised to an extreme extent. Although many white South Africans suffered from apartheid, non-whites (ethnically categorised as “blacks,” “coloureds” and “Indians”) were the objects of systematic oppression. Farber’s presentation of Klytemnestra as the only white character highlights this fact. When the audience members see her abuse Elektra, they are, on the one hand, invited to take her as the representative of apartheid ideology. On the other hand, the portrayal of Klytemnestra as the object of abuse complicates the perpetrator/victim opposition. Arguably, this also brings up the danger of implying that mitigating circumstances reduce the extent to which Klytemnestra can be held accountable for her acts. A perpetrator’s trauma does not absolve this person from responsibility for his or her act of violence. Different from Farber, Fleishman gives no instructions with regards to the racial make-up of his cast; race remains absent from his text. This is another way of de-racialising violence, one that focuses on the personal experience of cyclical violence rather than on the racial politics behind it. It also points to the importance of looking beyond the racial division and considering that, as Stathaki notes, the power relations at work were also based on economic, class and geographical terms (2009: 177). Still, the absence of race from Fleishman’s text does of course not imply its absence from performances of his play.

A consequence of Fleishman’s and Farber’s focus on Clytemnestra’s history of suffering, a suffering that is absent from Aeschylus, is that it challenges her traditional

¹⁴ The distinction between “victim” and “perpetrator” is characteristic of truth commissions in general, leading Mark Osiel to compare them to morality plays, with characters functioning allegorically as representatives of good and evil. But “[w]hat makes for a good ‘morality play’ tends not to make for a fair trial. And if it is the simplifications of melodrama that are needed to influence collective memory, then the production had best be staged somewhere other than in a court of law” (quoted in Cole 2007: 170).

representation in the Western tradition. While Clytemnestra could as easily be depicted as a trauma survivor, Katleen L. Komar argues that the literature of antiquity usually portrays her as the root cause of violence, representing a number of roles that have traditionally been assigned to women: “the demonic and vengeful woman, the adulterous wife and the avenging mother” (2003: 1-2, 6).¹⁵ In undermining the traditional representation of Clytemnestra, Fleishman and Farber address the gender politics it embodies. Doing so, they achieve something else as well. Rather than essentialising tragedy as an atemporal myth, they demonstrate that the migration of antiquity to the present is a complex process, which involves change and new perspectives, not only on Greek tragedy’s place and relevance within this present, but also the tragedies themselves. Fleishman’s and Farber’s representations of Clytemnestra underscore her relevance in and for the present, while undermining the notion of a 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 this way, what I refer to as the politics of adaptation is performed.

When people speak and tell, ideally others listen and hear. When perpetrators hear their victims recount the suffering they have inflicted, this may elicit responsibility or remorse. Conversely, when victims hear their torturers or the torturers of their loved ones admit to their crimes, this may help them heal. However, there are other, less ideal possibilities, for example, the exchange between Electra and Clytaemnestra in Fleishman’s play. Clytaemnestra claims the right to speak: “But I am speaking, I’m screaming!/ Your father deserved to die.” She then recounts her brutal murder of Agamemnon. It is a testimony of sorts, but (like in Farber) not in order to be forgiven or to express remorse. Clytaemnestra not only relates her murder in gross detail, but she also claims that “[it] was the most pleasurable experience of my life”; “[t]o see that look once more, I would do it again and again and again” (31). This testimony may reveal, but whether this “full disclosure” will help Electra heal remains doubtful.

The contentious relation between truth and healing became painfully clear during one of the TRC hearings. Krog relates how the former secret police officer Jeffrey Benzien was asked by one of his victims, Tony Yengeni (later a member of the ANC cabinet), to demonstrate how he had tortured him using his Wet Bag Method. In *Molora* the moment is replicated in scene viii, titled “wet bag method,” in which Klytemnestra re-enacts her torture of Elektra (47-48). After Benzien demonstrated his method, he turned to Yengeni and asked, “Do you remember, Mr. Yengeni, that within thirty minutes you betrayed Jennifer Schreiner? Do you remember pointing

¹⁵ Komar discusses how late-twentieth-century women rewrite Troy and revise the figure of Clytemnestra in order to “challenge customary images of gender roles” and “question the Western, heroic tradition and the ways in which violence helps to found that tradition and define female archetypes” (2003: 13).

out Bongani Jonas to us on the highway?” (Krog 2000: 94). Journalist Sandile Dikeni recounted the hearing as follows:

And so continues the torture of Tony Yengeni. ... with some of us regarding him as a traitor to the cause, a sell-out, a cheat and in some stupid twist of faith and fate, his torturer becomes the hero, the revealer, the brave man who informed us all about it all. ... And now, as I look at Yengeni, I see blood ... The blood of Yengeni's friends and comrades crushed and sucked out of their lungs by the heroes of Apartheid—in under forty minute, says the torturer, in his clinically precise “full disclosure.” (quoted in Krog 2000: 97)¹⁶

The described episode demonstrates that revealing does not necessarily result in healing. Benzien's testimony did not humble him, nor did it re-empower his victims. It took him only minutes, writes Krog, to “manipulate most of his victims back into the roles of their previous relationship—where he has the power and they the fragility” (2000: 95). The “truth” that came from this perpetrator's mouth proved to be the continuation of torture. To what extent can “facts” about past crimes help to pave the way towards reconciliation, when these facts not only recount but also perpetuate violence? The Benzien episode offers a disturbing example of how the quasi-legal context of its hearings inevitably curtailed the process the TRC was nurturing.

THEATRE OF WITNESSING AND MOURNING

Although the TRC emphasised the heterogeneity of its narrative, be it personal, historical or national, this heterogeneity was, as I have discussed, mediated by and structured within a larger national narrative. The TRC had to construct a linear story with a past of suffering and inequality, a present of testimony and mourning, and a future of reconciliation. The formulation of a coherent national memory of the past meant that the pluralised narratives of those who testified were incorporated into a unifying narrative (Moon 2006: 269; Hutchison 2005: 357). This move from plurality to singularity is formally illustrated by the final report which, Sanders explains, constructs a historical narrative that encloses the first-person narratives and which, in contrast to the hearings, “leaves a relatively limited domain of utterance to the witnesses” (2000: 18). Farber and Fleishman place emphasis on and re-activate the personal stories. In performances of their plays, moreover, these personal stories are also brought back into the presence of their performance, as well as resituated within a community context of witnesses and audience members.

¹⁶ Krog writes, “the sight of this bluntly built white man [Benzien] squatting on the back of a black victim [Yengeni], who lies face down on the floor, and pulling a blue bag over his head will remain one of the most loaded and disturbing images in the life of the Truth Commission” (2000: 93).

For Farber, the relation between storyteller and community is of crucial importance. The “ash” of her title provides the poetic link between both. In her foreword she explains:

Our story begins with a handful of cremated remains that Orestes delivers to his mother’s door... From the ruins of Hiroshima, Baghdad, Palestine, Northern Ireland, Rwanda, Bosnia, the concentration camps of Europe and modern-day Manhattan—to the remains around the fire after the storytelling is done... *Molora* (the Sesotho word for “ash”) is the truth we must all return to, regardless of what faith, race or clan we hail from. (8)

Farber moves from the ash as a residue of violence to the ash that remains after the subsequent recounting of this violence, when the private experiences of victims are brought into the public realm. Before I expand on this emphasis on community, let me comment briefly on another aspect of the quoted passage: the way in which Farber extends the relevance of her play beyond South Africa, by referring to a variety of other contexts of political conflict. She thereby emphasises the common humanity that underlies historical and socio-political distinctions. At the same time, however, indiscriminately mingling different events, peoples and experiences entails the danger of blurring historical differences. Underwriting such criticism, Feldman expands on the danger of incorporating the particular into a universalising moralist discourse. “All terror is local,” he explains, “the universalization project of transnational human rights, or the unifying anthropology of the victim, seek to elevate these narratives from the particular, and from the opaque materiality of state, ethnicized, gendered, or racialized terror” (2004: 169). When human rights are discussed in general terms, the concrete structures and processes that threaten these rights are often obscured.¹⁷

Of the different situations of conflict she evokes, Farber puts most emphasis on the events of September 11, 2001 in New York. Extending her ash metaphor, she includes a paragraph about the “fine white powdery substance” that “gently floated down upon heart-broken New York” amid “the grief, recriminations and the Bush administration’s indiscriminate wielding of revenge” after the attack on the World Trade Centre (8). By having the ash of her title descend on “ground zero” as well, Farber attempts to index a

¹⁷ Feldman continues: “Locked into the materiality of the violent particular, the victim of political terror cannot be deployed for moral edification, cannot be retooled into a commodity artefact for a marketplace of public emotions, until the biographical artefact itself is resituated in a framework of legal redress and/or psychic therapeutics. Yet it is in these dense political particularities and gross practices of atrocity that may never be redressed or therapeutically treated that the cultural and political logic of such violence can be encountered” (2004: 169). Feldman addresses a main predicament of the TRC: it sought to achieve reconciliation by acknowledging the violence done to so many South Africans, but it could only address the cultural and political logic that had enabled this violence to a limited extent.

universal humanity. At the same time, I would suggest that her ashes are in danger of covering up particularities of loss.¹⁸

Farber continues, “[d]espite the praise Nelson Mandela received from ‘First World’ leaders for heralding great restraint through his transition in our troubled land, nothing could convince those same leaders to check their own ancient eye-for-an-eye, knee-jerk response and their resulting offensives of ‘Shock and Awe’ on the women and children of Baghdad”; as a result, “South Africa’s relatively peaceful transformation was an extraordinary exception in our vengeful world” (7). I hesitate to endorse Farber’s utilisation of South Africa’s recent political history to underwrite her criticism of the US-led invasion of Iraq. I already mentioned the problem of sidestepping historical differences. An added problem here, I think, is that to present South Africa’s post-apartheid transition as an exception in an otherwise vengeful world, suggests an unrealistically romantic picture that fails to address the many problems South Africa faces today, most notably poverty, unemployment, violence and AIDS.

Through her ash metaphor, Farber emphasises the active role of the community, gathering round the fire to listen to the stories of suffering and caring for the victims. This reflects the importance of community during the TRC process where, as Feldman explains, many victims who testified “were positioned as speaking from and for the community—speaking for familial, township, religious, and political filiations that had undergone common political terror” (2004: 175). The hearings were held in local community-based institutions, such as churches and schools, and witnessed by community members, whose presence functioned as a form of validation. Through public expressions of emotions, people in the audience supported the witnesses.¹⁹

The chorus in *Molara* witness the confrontation between Elektra and Klytemnestra. However, different from what happened at many hearings, they do not interfere with or react to what they see. They do accompany the action with music, which could be understood as a form of response. At the end of the play, they transform into an active chorus. Their singing of a “haunting song” inspires Orestes to stop the cycle of vengeance and he urges his sister to do the same: “[w]alk away. Rewrite this ancient end” (83). Elektra, not yet ready to relinquish her vengeance, grabs the axe and runs towards Klytemnestra, but the chorus overpower her and comfort her as she weeps.

¹⁸ Michael Rothberg deals with this dilemma in his book on “multi-directional memory.” As an alternative to either proclaiming an event incomparable to others or turning it into a universalizing moral example, he propose the notion of “multidirectional memory,” in which memory becomes something “subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing: something “productive and not privative,” which allows for the memory of one history to help articulate other histories (2009: 3, 6).

¹⁹ The implication that suffering is never solely individual but always affects the community resonates with the position of community in African cultures and with the concept of *ubuntu*, the Nguni word for “humaneness,” which refers to a social ethic that implies communalism and the care for others (Johann Le Roux 2000: 43). As I shall discuss below, *ubuntu* was given a prominent position in the TRC discourse.

They “move swiftly as one. They grab Electra and overpower her” and they “restrain her and pull her to the ground where they cradle her like a child” (85). Farber makes the chorus the main agents in breaking the cycle of revenge, because “it was not the gods—nor any *deus ex machine*—that delivered us from ourselves. It was the common everyman and woman who, in the years following democracy, gathered in modest halls across the country to face their perpetrators across a table, and find a way forward for us all” (7). As in most of the adaptations I have thus far discussed, there is no metaphysical fate or resolution; the emphasis is on human agency.

Farber’s emphasis on storytelling as a way forward corresponds to the TRC’s goal to uncover the stories and thus create a new, reconciled, South Africa. Jolly argues that precisely because narrative holds the potential to resist closure and generate 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,” the TRC was able to create a space in which different, sometimes conflicting, voices could be heard. It thus instructed what apartheid had oppressed (openness and debate, negotiation and contestation) and performed the values that were to shape the new democratic South Africa (2001: 709-710). Through the narratives of those who testified, the TRC attempted to construct a past on which to build a future.²⁰

French philologist and philosopher Barbara Cassin relates the “management of the relation between past en future” in South Africa to an episode in Athenian history. Like the playwrights I discuss (and like myself), she turns to ancient Greece to examine contemporary South Africa. She refers to Athens’ defeat in the Peloponnesian war, when Sparta replaced the Athenian democratic institution by a tyrannical regime of thirty “Spartophiles,” which was followed by a year of civil war. The violence ended when in 403 BC amnesty was negotiated. The amnesty decree instructed people “not to recall misfortunes of the past”; it was, in short, based on amnesia (Cassin 2002: 19; Loraux 2006: 15, 29). In her comparison of the Athenian decree with the South African TRC, Cassin observes that although both present “two opposite politics of deliberative memory,” forgetting versus remembering, they nonetheless have a shared objective: to break with the past and be reconciled (2002: 26). She points to the emphasis in both contexts on a shared language as a requirement for establishing a political community,

²⁰ Paul Ricoeur explains that because testimony performs the transition from the personal to the public domain, it performs 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. This process is reciprocal, because only through their inscription into history do people’s testimonies become accepted and validated (184).

whether this involves a written agreement to stay silent about the past or a theatrical forum in which narrating the past takes centre stage.²¹

The transition towards a better future, Cassin observes, shows discourse as performance, both in the theatrical sense, with regard to the TRC's spectacular character, and in the pragmatic sense, with regard to the "repeated and nearly 'incantatory' exigency to 'tell the truth', 'tell their story':

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 relation between "story histories" and "history-history" is complicated, however, by the fact that the TRC's heterogeneous character was inevitably also arbitrated, mediated and framed by external judicial and religious discourses.

Possibly to recover the heterogeneity of the hearings, Farber divides *Molora* into nineteen scenes that dramatise accounts of the past. The first scene, "testimony," metatheatrically frames the following eighteen, in which experiences of the past are not only narrated, but also performed. After scene 1, the Chorus breaks into song and Elektra and Klytemnestra step onto a raised stage to re-enact fragments from the past. With this gesture, the stage descriptions state, "mother and daughter commit to the process of unearthing the past" (25). Scene ii ("murder") re-enacts Klytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon, for example, while scenes iv ("interrogation") and vii ("wet bag method") re-enact Klytemnestra's torture of Electra to get information out of her about Orestes' whereabouts.²²

Farber's use of the metatheatrical device of the play-within-the-play points to the theatrical nature of the TRC hearings. As Catherine M. Cole explains, they were characterised by "theatrical and dramatic emotional displays, improvisational storytelling, singing, weeping, and ritualistic lighting of candles" (2007: 167, 174). The TRC toured South Africa, in Cole's words, "like a traveling road show," holding hearings on raised platforms in churches, town halls and community centres throughout the country (172). Entering the various venues, victims, perpetrators and audience members were greeted by banners that read "Revealing is Healing" and "The Truth Will Set You Free." These were powerful slogans to frame the TRC project, legitimising the commission's name by establishing a direct connection between truth

²¹ Besides Athens and South Africa, Cassin also looks at how France has managed classified archives, such as during the Second World War. This latter context I do not consider here.

²² The different scenes are: i: testimony; ii: murder; iii: exile; iv: interrogation; v: dreams; vi: grief; vii: grave; viii wet bag method; ix: initiation; x: ash; xi: found; xii: plan; xiii: home; xiv: curse; xv: vengeance; xvi: lost; xvii: truth; xviii: shift; xix: rises.

and the sought-after end point of reconciliation and healing. Despite the emphasis on local communities, the audience to the TRC hearings reached far beyond those present in the various venues. The proceedings were published within papers; many could also be witnessed live on radio and television. The media played a large role in making victims and perpetrators heard by a national and international audience.

Postcolonial scholar Benita Parry nonetheless questions whether “the public staging of mourning can truly facilitate national catharsis and psychotherapeutic healing” (2004: 187). Her choice for the word “catharsis,” a term from classical theatre theory, is telling: it presents the TRC’s project of national healing as an attempt to purge the nation from all that stood in the way of reconciliation.²³ The extent to which the concept of catharsis is problematic across both tragedy and the TRC is striking. According to Aristotle, through pity and fear tragedy effectuates the catharsis, or purification, of such emotions (1996: 10). In Page duBois’ interpretation, Aristotle considers tragedy “from the point of view of power, administration, and management of the population,” with the genre working to “displac[e] the struggle over social power, which generates pity and fear, into the realm of art in order to maintain order” (2002: 24). In contrast to this political exploitation of tragedy, Bertolt Brecht believed that only the absence of catharsis could truly inspire theatre audiences to take political action. It seems legitimate to regard the TRC as a state-managed theatre of mourning, accommodating the nation’s emotions in order to contain and control them, preventing chaos. Although this seems to have worked to some extent—a major bloodbath was avoided—mourning is, of course, a complex, long-lasting and personal process, which far exceeds its public staging and state control.

While Parry focuses on the ways in which the TRC hearings were staged, Cole analyses their performative nature. Her conclusions are more positive. She suggests that the “dramatic, unruly, ephemeral, embodied, and performed” aspects of the Human Rights Violations hearings, including not only words but also “gestures, cadence, intonation, and embodied expressions,” point to their performative potential; they were “*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 analysis allows for a better understanding of the hearings’ double function. Although they were staged in ways that fitted them into a particular political framework, performatively they did not simply reflect this dominant narrative, but also worked to challenge it:

²³ Richard A. Wilson similarly 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). His arguments are based on research in the African townships of the Vaal region North of Johannesburg.

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, emphasis in text)

The disjunction between individual testimonies and the narrative that enclosed them point to the performative power of challenging this overarching narrative from within. But even if victims succeeded (partly or wholly) in performing their truths, the question remains to what extent it resulted in personal healing.²⁴

Farber's audience is left to wonder whether Elektra will ever be able to heal from the violence to which she has been subjected. They witness the torture performed when Klytemnestra stuffs a cloth into Elektra's mouth and burns her with cigarettes. During the interrogation, which, a stage description instructs, Elektra 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). The Dutch Old Testament scholar Ellen van Wolde explains that this episode was often referred to as a biblical legitimisation of apartheid theology, understanding the Africans as the descendents of Ham, hence a people destined to be servants (2003: 13-14). Seeing the suffering Elektra endures "live," audience members are led to understand why she feels that "if the dead lie in dust and nothingness,/ while the guilty pay not with blood for blood—/ then we are nothing but a history without a future" (24-25). Their physical proximity vis-à-vis the violence may invite them to reflect on their experience and on their own position beyond the theatre walls. As Van Zyl Smith states, they could "have a story to tell like that about to be heard" (2010: 125).

Yet, audience members might also conclude that what they are witnessing does not involve them. A general problem of trials, a lawyer and TRC staff member explains, is that they are about individual culpability, not about the system as a whole: "[t]rials set up an 'us versus them' dynamic. A trial is not about our complicity. It makes it look like they're guilty, not us. So all of white South Africans can look at Eugene de Kock and say 'evil guy' and not realize that they made him possible" (quoted in Stathaki 2009: 146). As a theatre of witnessing and mourning, the TRC may have not only revealed apartheid's atrocities, but may also have made it possible for those complicit with this system to designate specific perpetrators as scapegoats and be cathartically released of complicity and culpability. The question whether witnesses or audience members are

²⁴ As Grahame Hayes observes, in spite of what the banners at the entrance of the TRC venues asserted, "*just* revealing is *not* just healing" and "*what* people have to reveal might not be healable, or at least not healable by means of the one-off revelation before the TRC" (43, emphases in text).

called to responsibility or whether they are possibly freed of such feelings is important within the context of the TRC, but also pertains to performances of the two plays.²⁵

Molora places emphasis on the theatrical nature of the TRC hearings it dramatises. Arguably, the TRC sought to utilise the potential that theatre offers, constructing a public theatre of mourning that allowed for a plurality of possibly conflicting, co-existing voices and stories. These stories were inevitably contained within the overarching, singular narrative of national reconciliation. By bringing the TRC back into the theatre, Farber challenges this movement towards singularity and closure. She returns emphasis to personal stories and to the presence of their telling, which must make performances of *Molora* especially forceful. The published text, my object of study, is, however, preceded (and thereby framed) by another text, “The Power of Speech” by Sophie Nield. She writes that “[i]n South Africa’s reconstruction of itself through the mechanism of the TRC, fury and vengeance gives way to reconciliation. The world is remade ... We can find reconciliation in the theatre” (11). Nield insists on reconciliation as the ideal end-point and presents the theatre as the means to achieve this. Her text stands in tension with the play it introduces, which in contrast reveals the theatre’s potential to work against the closure “reconciliation” performs.²⁶

JUSTICE: DEFINITIONS AND DEMANDS

In Fleishman’s tragedy, like Aeschylus’ *Orestes and Electra* murder Aegisthus and Clytaemnestra. Farber’s story has a different outcome, which shows that the migration of antiquity to the present extends beyond the mere re-situating of universal myths. Her refiguration of Aegisthus, Ayesthus (who is represented by a large worker’s uniform hanging on a washing line) is killed, but the chorus prevent Orestes and Elektra from murdering Klytemnestra. Because of their intervention, the ancient end is rewritten: Farber’s Klytemnestra lives and a humbled Electra overcomes her vengeance. Not only Aeschylus’ trilogy, it is implied, but also South Africa’s violent history is rewritten, though residues of vengeance remain. In the epilogue, Klytemnestra speaks into the microphone:

²⁵ Parry explains that despite the necessity to differentiate between entire populations and those who devised and inflicted atrocities, this differentiation is insufficient because it “too readily rehabilitates the many who were complicit with the outrages committed in their name—and no state machine however repressive can operate without the concurrence of large numbers.” Moreover, a change of government does not mean that all citizens “disavow old allegiances” or “admit as abominations the policies which they once endorsed and tolerated” (2004: 182). Tellingly, only one former apartheid cabinet minister has sought amnesty; all the others have, journalist Greg Barrow explains, “dodged” the TRC and “passed off the crimes of the apartheid era as the work of a few rotten apples” (1998: np).

²⁶ Sophie Nield is (at the time of the publication of *Molora*) head of the Centre for Excellence in Training for Theatre at the University of London. For further analysis of how the theatrical structure of criminal trials facilitates but also limits processes of healing, see Yasco Horsman (2010).

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. (87)

Then, the stage directions instruct, a “*fine powdery substance gently floats down*” on the characters who stand in silence looking at the audience (87). The story has been told, the ash that remains around the fire floats down. Although the house of Atreus, and the South African nation it represents, rises up from the ashes, no family resolve or love can be regained.

Farber’s conclusion that the cycle of vengeance is broken “by grace alone” reflects the TRC’s emphasis on forgiveness. In its basic sense, argues the influential political philosopher Hannah Arendt, forgiveness is the “exact opposite of revenge” (1958: 241). The opposition informed the TRC hearings, where “[v]irtues of forgiveness and reconciliation were so loudly and roundly applauded that emotions of revenge, hatred and bitterness were rendered unacceptable, an ugly intrusion on a peaceful, healing process” (Wilson 2001: 17). Moon summarises that the political project of reconciliation organised the subjects, objects, types of enunciation and concepts in relationship to one another, providing a “general template-script” that defined what reconciliation was and what it involved, without recognising non-reconciled outcomes as possibilities (2006: 264). It is doubtful whether victims were given the choice to *not* forgive. Indeed, some of them later complained that they had felt expected, and therefore forced, to forgive their perpetrators. In their experience, forgiveness was their only option.²⁷

The emphasis on a Christian understanding of forgiveness had much to do with the influence of Church leaders, in particular the commission’s chairman, Archbishop Desmond Tutu. He recalls that the Commission accepted his call of prayer at the beginning and end of their meetings, and agreed that the victim-oriented hearings were to have a “solemn atmosphere with prayers, hymns and ritual candle-lighting to commemorate those who had died in the struggle” (1999: 72). This appealed to

²⁷ See the report on survivors’ perceptions of the TRC by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation between 7 August 1997 and 1 February 1998, as found online <www.csvr.org.za/papers/papkhul.htm>, accessed 18 October 2008.

Christian South Africans, but excluded people of other religions.²⁸ “It is interesting,” Tutu 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). This tension between a legal-political and a religious-redemptive understanding of truth and reconciliation within the supposedly secular institution of the TRC is unsettling (Shore and Kline 2006: 312). Moreover, to present “truth,” “reconciliation” and “forgiveness” as self-evident concepts and to implement them in political programmes disregards individual differences and obscures the particular (political, religious) ideologies to which the definition of a certain concept is inevitably tied.

To refer to forgiveness in the context of political reconciliation is essentially flawed, as it insinuates a moral and personal discourse into the political realm. The essence of forgiveness is that one can only forgive on behalf of oneself, not of somebody else, let alone groups of people. However, for Arendt, although some things are unforgivable, forgiveness is a necessity of (political) life, because without being forgiven, we could never be absolved from the consequences of our actions (1958: 237). From this pragmatic viewpoint, forgiveness is an act that frees us from the past; where vengeance reinforces the initial deed by perpetuating a “chain reaction,” it “is the only reaction that acts in an unexpected way and thus retains, though being a reaction, something of the original character of action” (241). Forgiveness enables action and, consequently, change.

In his essay “On Forgiveness” Jacques Derrida deals with the relation between forgiveness and politics from a different viewpoint, exploring the tension between an “unconditional forgiveness” and a “conditional forgiveness proportionate to the recognition of the fault” (2001: 34-35). He cites the TRC as an example of how “grand scenes of forgiveness and repentance” theatrically appropriate an absolute idea of forgiveness into the everyday. The conflation of the rhetoric of forgiveness and reconciliation results in a confusion “between the order of forgiveness and the order of justice,” between the absolute and the profane. According to Derrida, “forgiveness does not, it should never amount to a therapy of reconciliation,” since that would imply the intervention of a third party within what should remain a one-to-one relationship between victim and perpetrator (41-43).²⁹ He shares Parry’s scepticism about the effectiveness of national catharsis and psychotherapeutic healing, similarly insisting

²⁸ The absence of a Christian message of forgiveness in Fleishman’s play could be seen as a comment on this shortcoming. The title *In the City of Paradise* does contain a religious reference, but its intention seems mostly ironic: this city is far from paradise, nor is paradise presented as an achievable goal.

²⁹ Derrida writes: “each time forgiveness is at the service of a finality, be it noble and spiritual (atonement or redemption, reconciliation, salvation), each time that it aims to re-establish a normality (social, national, political, psychological) by a work of mourning, by some therapy or ecology of memory, then the “forgiveness” is not pure—nor is its concept. 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” (2001: 31-32, emphases in text).

that reconciliation cannot be achieved through the public staging of mourning and forgiveness. Perhaps the problem with the TRC was not so much that it drew on a personal and moral concept of forgiveness within a political sphere, but rather that this concept was given such a dominant position.

The adaptations call attention to the complicated place of forgiveness in the TRC process. “We are still only here by grace alone,” Farber’s Klytemnestra states, yet she is saved from Elektra’s vengeance because the Chorus of Women intervene and pull Elektra to the ground. In their arms, Elektra “finally breaks down, weeping for every injustice of the past” and “slowly finds her stillness” (85). Stillness does not equal forgiveness. It seems significant that “grace” is only referred to by Klytemnestra and never articulated by Elektra or Orestes. Their stillness, their silence begs the question whether forgiveness has actually taken place, eliciting reflection on the role of what Derrida refers to as another mediating institution in forgiveness, namely language (2001: 42). Is “I forgive” a phrase that does what it says? Can forgiveness be performed without its articulation? Does to state forgiveness, whether one wishes to or whether one feels forced to, mean that forgiveness actually takes place? Or is the articulation of forgiveness separated from its actual performance?

Elektra’s and Orestes’ “stillness” in the conclusion of *Molara* brings these questions to mind. That they help their mother to her feet might signal the beginning of a process of forgiveness; a difficult process because, writes Farber, “such a journey is neither simply nor easy, and has little to do with the reductive notions of a miraculously forgiving Rainbow Nation or ‘turning the other cheek’” (7). The intervention of the chorus/community suggests that it is difficult to conceive of forgiveness in its unconditional form, because it is not delimited to the confines of a one-to-one relationship between perpetrator and victim, but informed by mixture of personal, social and political factors and relations. Elektra does not forgive miraculously, but with the help of the community she might one day forgive. Although unarticulated, in *Molara* forgiveness is nonetheless on the horizon.

In Fleishman’s *In the City of Paradise* forgiveness remains entirely absent. His conclusion is, instead, about amnesty. Fleishman’s focus on amnesty without any reference to forgiveness indicates a more critical position towards the place of forgiveness in the TRC, but also points towards an inconsistency, namely that amnesty—understood as the institutionalisation and collectivisation of forgiveness—was never directly linked to forgiveness but to truth. Truth (“full disclosure”) would pave the way towards reconciliation. It seems contradictory that though forgiveness was related to full disclosure, one of the conditions for amnesty, it was never mentioned

as a condition for amnesty itself.³⁰ 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 (Cole 2007: 174).

Traditionally, amnesty suggests a collective forgetting of past wrongs and a wish to break from the past. Indeed, in ancient Greek, amnesty and amnesia are two meanings of same word. In the previous section, I have discussed the amnesty of 403 BC, intended to heal the community after a violent episode in Athens' history. The decision not to try the crimes of war, classicist Victoria Wohl argues, was an "[a]ttempt to prevent the courts from becoming a theatre for replaying—and thus keeping alive—the civic tragedies of the past. A break from the past seemed the only way to reorient the law toward the future goal of civic justice" (2003: 100). During the negotiations that preceded the founding of the TRC, several members of the apartheid government and security forces had pressed for a similar kind of collective amnesty. However, as Tutu writes, this was not an option, because it "would have victimised the victims of apartheid a second time round. It would have meant denying their experience, a vital part of their identity" (1999: 32). In contrast with the Athenian decree of amnesty, then, the TRC associated amnesty with *anamnesis* rather than amnesia (Schaap 2005: 113). Amnesty was intended not to break with, but to uncover the past; recollection was considered the means to achieve reconciliation.³¹

The emphasis on truth meant that applicants for amnesty were not asked to apologise, express remorse and ask for forgiveness, but solely to state their crimes and to demonstrate that these crimes were political in nature. The danger of connecting amnesty to truth in this way is that truth may become a mere commodity and be stripped of its ethical impact (Henderson 2000: 459). It makes it impossible to separate applicants' motivation to tell the truth from the coercive lure of exoneration.³² For Soyinka, whose reworking of Euripides' *Bacchae* I have discussed in Chapter Three, the main problem with South Africa's chosen strategy is its "implicit, *a priori* exclusion

³⁰ A memorandum to the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Bill of 1995 states that the bill was "based on the principle that reconciliation depends on forgiveness and that forgiveness can only take place if gross violations of human rights are fully disclosed." As found online <<http://www.doj.gov.za/trc/legal/bill.htm>>, accessed 21 October 2008.

³¹ There is an important difference between the civil war of Athens, which had lasted nine months and was therefore a recent event known by the citizens involved, and apartheid, which lasted some forty years: "In the former case, the issue is not how to bring the past to light, everything is immediately known by everyone, it is *forgetting* that must be constructed. In the latter case, on the contrary, the past is a hole or a series of distortions which cannot be shared" (Cassin 2002: 29, emphasis in text).

³² Tutu presents amnesty as a necessary political compromise: "We did not decide on amnesty. The political parties decided on amnesty. Amnesty made our election possible. The amnesty clause was inserted in the early hours of the morning after an exhausted night of negotiating. The last thing, the last sentence, the last clause, was added: amnesty shall be granted through the process of reconciliation. And it was only when *that* was put it, that the *boere* signed the negotiations, opening the door to our election" (Krog 2000: 30-31, emphasis in text).

of criminality and, thus, responsibility” (1999: 31). The escape from legal prosecution by means of amnesty indeed implies the escape from accountability. However, the imperative to ascribe to the position of “perpetrator” to apply for amnesty, as well as having to admit one’s crimes in public, maybe have also forced many perpetrators to take responsibility. Ultimately, however, responsibility relies on sincerity and sincerity is difficult to judge. Ingrid de Kok’s doubt whether processes dedicated to reconciliation might not still “unwittingly encourage social and cultural amnesia” is therefore legitimate (quoted in Parry 2004: 109).

Fleishman refers to the TRC’s amnesty arrangement in the final scene of *In the City of Paradise*. Orestes and Electra are hounded by Furies in gas masks, among them Clytemnestra’s parents Tyndareus and Leda, who do not figure in Aeschylus. Fleishman introduces another generation affected by the violence. In Euripides’ *Orestes*, in which Tyndareus does play a prominent role, he threatens to encourage the citizens of Argos to stone Orestes to death. In Fleishman, however, despite his grief and anger about his daughter’s death, he prevents the mob from stoning Orestes and Electra. He persuades them to “let the law run its course./ We seek not private vengeance here, but public retribution/ Justice will win out./ Our time will come” (37). Orestes explains his conflicting duties: “Should I have kept still about her deeds?/ What would he have done then?/ Hounded me with the Furies of a father’s hatred!// Or are there Furies on my mother’s side,/ but none to help him in this deeper hurt?” While Electra views their act simply as a “patriotic service,” Orestes experiences moral conflict (34-35).

Tyndareus argues that by having killed their mother rather than taking her to court they have become like her. He laments, “[w]here I want to know, will this chain/ of murder end? Can it ever end, in fact,/ since the last to kill is doomed to stand/ under permanent sentence of death by revenge?” (35). Tyndareus’ call to replace vengeance with legal action is not answered. Although the “wise and learned judges” find Orestes and Electra “Guilty on all counts,” the court herald announces that they will be granted amnesty. The lines he speaks are almost identical to those of the 1995 Promotion of National Unity 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.

Tyndareus is outraged at the decision to grant amnesty to his daughter's murderers:

So they walk free? Unpunished for their acts?
What justice this?
... What about our justice?
A parent's right to recompense and retribution.
... This amnesty pollutes our law,
the clear well is fouled
and we are doomed to suffer great thirst
What say the people to this travesty of justice? (38-39)

Tyndareus' objections call to mind those of the Furies in the final part of the *Oresteia* trilogy, the *Eumenides*. They too take offence at Athena's new system of justice; they too cling to different demands of justice.

The final image of the play suggests a "brighter future of peace and prosperity for all" (38). The mob that was previously about to stone to death Electra and Orestes, now holds them above the ground in "triumphant adoration" (39). The TRC's amnesty arrangement is presented as an imperfect but necessary tool for democracy. At the same time, read in line with the absence of forgiveness and the play's title, the chorus' "triumphant adoration" of Electra and Orestes could also be read ironically, presenting reconciliation as "only a utopia that can be achieved only in the 'City of Paradise,' but not in real life" (Steinmeyer 2007: 116). Tyndareus cannot forgive; his objections to reconciliatory justice echo those of many victims of apartheid, who felt that the amnesty provisions denied them the right to seek redress.³³

The opposition between reconciliatory and retributive justice came to be identified as the opposition between Africa and the West. When asked to defend the amnesty provisions, Tutu argued that the notion of a retributive justice is Western in origin 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" (quoted in Minow

³³ 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 and violated international law. The appeal was dismissed, with the respondents conceding that although amnesty to the wrongdoer does obliterate fundamental human rights, Parliament was "entitled to enact the Act [offering amnesty] in the terms it did ... so as to enhance and optimize the prospects of facilitating the constitutional journey from the shame of the past to the promise of the future" (Parry 2004: 187). Although the Constitutional Court ruled that amnesty in exchange for truth did not violate the constitution, it did violate people's individual right to opt for a kind of closure other than the reconciliatory one promoted by the TRC.

1998: 81). The idea of a distinctly African sense of justice became entwined with the concept of *ubuntu*, the Nguni word referring to “humaneness” which was given a prominent position in the 1995 Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act. As Wilson argues, the creation of a polarity between a romanticised “African” idea of reconciliation (founded on the notion of *ubuntu*) and a Western notion of retributive justice (implying vengeance) closed down space to discuss 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.” With the “Africanist wrapping used to sell a reconciliatory version of human rights talk to black South Africans,” he continues, “*Ubuntu* belies the claim that human rights would have no culturalist or ethnic dimensions” (2001: 13). It was implied that if you were truly African, there had to be forgiveness in your heart. Wilson’s criticism and the debate about the TRC’s amnesty arrangement point to the inevitable clash in post-conflict societies between different understandings and demands of justice.³⁴

THE POLITICS OF RECONCILIATION

Despite the TRC’s attempts to promote reconciliation, it remained contested and difficult to define.³⁵ Moreover, as Krog argues, the “re” in “reconciliation” assumes there was something in common that can be reconciled, but “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).

To further examine reconciliation, I propose to return to Farber’s and Fleishman’s pre-text, Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*. Throughout the trilogy, Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Apollo, Orestes and the Erinyes (the Furies, spirits of wrath) all claim to have justice on their side, while their different understandings and rhetorical appropriations violently

³⁴ This rhetoric of reconciliation, Wilson explains, forms a great discrepancy with, for example, the retributive practice of justice within township courts. Whereas human-rights activists look towards a future of rehabilitation and reconciliation, retributionists in townships “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).

³⁵ Andrew Schaap lists different interpretations of reconciliation: “a non-racial ideology that promotes unity in the form of the ‘rainbow nation’; an inter-communal understanding that would preserve the distinct identities of separate cultures; a religious ideology that demands repentance from wrongdoers; a human rights approach that calls for restoring the rule of law in order to prevent future abuses; and community-building that would restore social trust in divided townships” (2006: 263).

compete. In the final part, the *Eumenides*, Aeschylus dramatises the implications of reconciliation and the political deployment of justice. At Orestes' trial, in front of a newly established Athenian court, the confrontation takes place between his defender Apollo, who has instructed Orestes to kill his mother to avenge his father's death, and the Erinyes who want Orestes to pay with his blood for matricide. In this court scene, Aeschylus demonstrates not only that justice lacks a fixed referent but also that its meaning depends on the political interests at stake. The *Eumenides* dramatises a reconciliatory process between the demands of different forms of justice, culminating in the celebration of Athena's court that puts an end to vengeance and installs a judicial system based on evidence and trial.

The reconciliation Athena achieves depends 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 of vengeance denied. Rather, as Philip Vellacott explains in his introduction, in their new function, the goddesses will embody "that ultimate sanction of fear which underlies the new order, as it dominated the old" (Aeschylus 1959: 20). By transforming "murderous begetting into blessed fecundity," to use Loraux's words, Athena attempts to compromise between the demands of the past and those of the future (2006: 38). The Furies, now transformed into the Eumenides and 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 and given a place within the new democracy. At least, that would be the official story.

Bernard Knox notes that the *Oresteia* traditionally has been read as "the triumph of civilization over the darkly mysterious forces of a sinister primitivism." For an earlier generation, he explains, "the promise of wisdom born of suffering, the triumph of an ultimately benevolent Zeus, the joint human and divine consecration of a just Athens, in which all conflicting forces and principles were accorded due place and honor, seemed to mirror their achievements" (quoted in Euben 1986: x). Christopher Rocco, a political scientist, lists a number of similar interpretations, in which the *Oresteia* is taken as a celebration of democracy and as the expression of progress from chaos to order. Among them is the one by 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).³⁶

In relation to the African context, a telling example of this view is Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Appunti per un Orestide Africana*, or *Notes for an African Oresteia* (1970), a collection of filmic observations for a film he was planning to make. Pasolini considers Africa's development in relation to the *Oresteia*:

³⁶ For other such progressivist readings of the *Oresteia*, see E.R. Dodds (1960) and H.D.F. Kitto (1956).

I feel I can recognise some analogies between the situation of the *Oresteia* and the situation of Africa today, especially concerning the transformation of the Furies, the Euryne, into the Eumenides. In other words, I mean that the tribal civilization seems to resemble archaic Greek civilization, and Orestes' discovery of democracy, carrying it then into his country which could be Argos in the tragedy and Africa in my film, is in a sense the discovery of democracy that Africa has also made in the last few years. (quoted in Wetmore 2003: 29)

Speaking of Africa's "discovery" of Western democracy without making any reference to European colonialism, Pasolini articulates the Eurocentric "classicising" discourse I discuss in my introductory chapter. Ancient Greece is instrumentalised to legitimate the dominancy of European civilisation over other, "less developed" or "not yet democratic" cultures.³⁷

Feminist interpretations have challenged the dominant reading of the *Oresteia* as a celebration of democracy. Classicist Froma Zeitlin argues that what is actually founded in the *Oresteia* is not Western civilisation, but a tradition of "misogynistic exclusion," since the "solution" or reconciliation of the *Eumenides* entails the hierarchisation of values: the subordination of the Furies to the Olympians, of barbarian to Greek and, most importantly for Zeitlin, of female to male (Rocco 1997: 144). Her point is supported by the court scene. When the judges of her court fail to cast a final vote, Athena's mediation displays a great amount of gender politics. She votes in favour of Orestes because the murder of Clytemnestra is less important than that of Agamemnon. She explains her motivation as follows:

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)

The first line refers to Athena's own birth from Zeus' head. The gender politics of Athena's vote, in which the death of a mother is classified as less grievous than that of a father, depends on Athena's own personal history, as a child of only one parent, her father Zeus. Just preceding her vote, Apollo has similarly argued in defence of Orestes 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 judgement is far from impartial. Zeitlin is right to argue that, as Rocco's paraphrases, "through the democratic rhetoric of equality, reason and consent legitimate the institutionalization

³⁷ For further discussion of Pasolini's *Notes*, see Wetmore (2003: 29-32) and Kim Gardi (1996).

of exclusionary polarities into systematized hierarchies, rather than creating a truly democratic order” (1997: 144). The reconciliation Athena achieves is by no means non-hierarchical. The democratic space she creates is a discursive order in which certain principles and interests predominate, while others are “relegated to relative silence” (Rocco 1997: 25). The problem of justice is not solved; rather, one version of justice is privileged over other versions (Goldhill 1986: 55-56).³⁸

In South Africa, something similar happened. The new democratic subject that was created was not, and still is not, congruent with the reality of the majority of the people. One understanding of justice, justice as reconciliation, was privileged, leaving sparse room for a retributionist discourse. Perhaps justice as reconciliation did best serve the nation-building project; in the new South Africa, people had to find ways to live together. Then again, maybe Wilson is right that the TRC’s effort to “forge a new moral vision of the nation” 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).

Precisely here the ancient and the contemporary meet. Just as Athena’s mediation is imperfect and ambiguous, so the TRC’s mediation entailed loss. Just as the new order Athena establishes remains precarious, so post-apartheid, democratic South Africa finds itself in a fragile state. The *Oresteia* dramatises this complexity, ending triumphantly but also presenting democracy as a construct open to struggle and renegotiation (Rocco 1997: 169). As J.G. Finlayson states, rather than instructing how reconciliation can and should be achieved,

[i]t is as if Aeschylus is telling us that justice, reason, and lawfulness are not established facts that need merely be recognised 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 continuously have to be critically re-examined and re-negotiated. Reconciliation, despite the finality that the word suggests, can never achieve closure; it is a process, rather than a state.

The political theorist Andrew Schaap reflects on the democratic potential of reconciliation. He argues that “reconciliation talk” presumes unity as a social good

³⁸ Simon Goldhill states that 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).

and depoliticises the terms in which the unity of the polity is represented. An agonistic account of democracy, however, calls attention to the politics of reconciliation and to the “fragility and contingency” of the community it seeks to construct:

Instead of understanding reconciliation in terms of restoring a relationship between alienated co-members of a moral community, agonistic democracy suggests that the problem of reconciliation, as a *political undertaking*, is how to transform a relation of enmity into one of civic friendship or, as Mouffe puts it, how to “transform antagonism into agonism.” (Schaap 2006: 268, emphasis in text)

The etymology of “agon” is related to “meeting,” “debate” and “contest” (Gagnon 2009: 4).³⁹ Chantal Mouffe draws on the concept of *agon* to propose an alternative model of democracy. Envisaging democratic politics in terms of consensus or reconciliation is, she argues, conceptually flawed and politically dangerous, as it negates the antagonistic forces that operate within society. Instead of trying to reconcile conflicting interests and values, democratic theorists and politicians should try to “envisage the creation of a vibrant ‘agonistic’ public sphere of contestation where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted” (2005: 2-3). It is not a matter of silencing dissenting voices, but of including them within politics.

The *Oresteia* could be understood to demonstrate the need for the agonistic democracies Mouffe envisions. Dissenting voices such as those of the Furies, transformed into the Kindly Ones, remain heard within Athena’s new order. However, Gagnon rightly argues that the trilogy also demonstrates the challenge that such an agonistic democracy involves: of controlling and channelling contesting, possibly aggressive tendencies without eradicating differences or limiting the political. Indeed, the order Athena secures by changing the Furies into the Kindly Ones indicates “a fragile and contingent harmony through coercion and fraught with tension and contradiction” (Gagnon 2009: 42). The *Oresteia* thus also functions as a warning against idealisations of agonistic politics, showing that

[a]gones and their politics not only provide an arena for the reconciliation of differences, but can also displace differences and justify exclusion instead of inclusion by permitting only certain kinds of contests, and in insisting through the threat of coercion or the realization of violence that the losers of agonistic contests must accept the terms of their defeat. (Gagnon 2009: 1, 4)

³⁹ Jennifer Gagnon explains that *agones* were found throughout Greek social and political life, “from the contests of the Olympic games, to the formalized legal arguments of the courts, to the political debates of the assembly, to the private teachings of the Sophists, and to the theatre of Dionysus” (2009: 4).

This dual perspective—exploring the challenge of reconciliatory politics but also of possible agonistic alternatives—makes the *Oresteia* relevant to the TRC and to post-apartheid South Africa. Like the TRC, the trilogy dramatises closure but simultaneously performs a critique of closure, probing the way in which the new “reconciled” democracy is negotiated and what this negotiation entails. This is how Greek tragedy functions as political theory.

Fleishman draws attention to the compromises of reconciliation towards the end of his play, in which he modifies the court scene of Aeschylus’ *Eumenides* to a TRC-like context. He emphasises the advantages but also the losses of the amnesty agreement and invites his audience to consider those for whom the TRC’s definition of justice remains unacceptable. Reconciliation is ambiguous; it is necessary but flawed and “grace” or “forgiveness” have little to do with it. Farber’s adaptation contains less ambiguity. Although her play reveals the potential of theatre to work against the closure of reconciliation, it nevertheless instructs that reconciliation can be achieved. As an epigraph to this chapter, I quoted the South African artist William Kentridge. He expands on the nature of “TRC-theatre” in his director’s note to *Ubu and the Truth Commission*: “Our theatre is a reflection on the debate rather than the debate itself. It tries to make sense of the memory rather than be the memory” (Taylor and Kentridge 1998: ix).⁴⁰ Farber stages the debate but includes little reflection on it. Unlike Fleishman, she dramatises a TRC-like hearing that results in reconciliation, but never probes what reconciliation means or how it relates to larger political and historical structures. Her decision to draw on Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* but leave the *Eumenides* out of consideration substantiates this critique. It is a surprising decision, because the trilogy’s concluding part holds considerable potential for critical reflection on what reconciliation entails. The *Eumenides* dramatises the promise of reconciliation, but also points to the loss that reconciliation inevitably entails.

THE WEIGHT OF THE PAST

The Furies not only represent the spirit of revenge, but also the imperative to remember evil. 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” (Booth 2001: 777-778). By accepting Athena’s offer to be institutionalised 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 does Bal, the Kindly Ones could be seen as agents of “cultural memorization,” an activity

⁴⁰ *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, written by Jane Taylor and produced by the Handspring Puppet Company, was first performed in 1997 at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, under the directorship of Kentridge.

“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 embodiments of memory, they have to fulfil the demands of both past and future within the present, a difficult and dangerous task because the line between keeping alive the past and paralysing 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. Although the dominant discourse of forgiveness denied them an official place within the new democratic “rainbow” nation of South Africa, they undoubtedly still roam under the surface, haunting perpetrators and victims, fighting their fight against forgetting. For memory cannot simply be relegated to the past but has to be sustained as active practice within the present and, more specifically, within an ongoing process of reconciliation. Although the TRC linked amnesty to remembrance or anamnesis, it inevitably entailed forgetting or amnesia as well. This is the inevitable outcome, it seems, of what Parry describes as the competing claims of reconciliation and remembrance (2004: 183). Tutu’s call to “shut the door on the past—not in order to forget it but in order not to allow it to imprison us” demonstrates this tension. The sense of closure he indicates necessarily entails a degree of forgetting (Final Report I 1998: 22). Parry reflects,

Whose interests, we must ask, are advanced by an officially instituted memory loss? Who profits by forgetting? Is it those who suffered subjugation, or those who instituted and maintained their condition? ... For since the abused, the punished and the insulted do not forget, the beneficiaries of amnesia are those whose ascendancy has been defeated or curtailed. (2004: 183)

At the same time, the future requires a degree of forgetting to prevent the past from paralysing the present.

Fleishman and Farber dramatise the start of a long process and emphasise the demands of the future. Their most important contribution is that they bring back focus to the private realm of personal suffering, inviting their audience to keep considering the individual stories that are involved; in a way, helping the furies in their fight to remember. Farber brings the TRC back to life, not the national narrative it sought to construct, but the specificity of the personal stories it originally revealed. These are stories that do not always fit, but that at times interrupt and displace the larger narrative that tried to contain them; stories that now, more than a decade after the TRC’s final report was published, have acquired an almost archival status. By performing such stories live on stage within the present, Farber returns to the performative aspect of

the hearings that is not reflected in the commission's official transcripts, reversing the shift from oral testimony to written narrative, from performance to text.⁴¹

In South Africa, Fleishman suggests, theatre is an important complementary practice. It is able to make absences present again, because it can keep the past alive within the present, and because it can connect the past to the yet unfulfilled future.⁴² However, this future is difficult to imagine, and Parry may be right that it has been jeopardised by an inadequate dealing with the past. Although the TRC succeeded in recovering fragments from the past, it lacked a "sustained theoretical encounter with a history of oppression," closing the door "on a radical orientation toward the future." Without restructuring society and absolving those who have been complicit in the oppressive system, reconciliation can never truly be achieved (Parry 2004: 182). The situation in present-day South Africa seems to offer a telling illustration to this warning. While in theory South Africa's non-racial democracy should secure equal rights and opportunities, in reality the majority of South Africans have experienced little or no change in their material conditions or social status. They remain cut off from the nation's wealth, a wealth that still rests primarily with the many multinational corporations complicit with the apartheid system.

The TRC's intention to create a shared point of origin 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 discouraging to see Tutu's and Mandela's emphasis on reconciling the nation and on establishing a non-racial democracy in relation to the racialised discourse that became more predominant under Thabo Mbeki's presidency.⁴³ The

⁴¹ Not that the TRC process officially reached its point of closure, nor its narrative, which is continuously being questioned. Many of the commission's recommendations to the government, about legally following up on those perpetrators who did not apply for amnesty or were rejected and about implanting a policy of reparation with which to compensate former victims, have yet to be put into practice. The commission was well aware that its years of active practice were only to be the beginning of a difficult process, and the failure of the government to adequately proceed with this process greatly discredits the TRC's intention of instigating long-lasting societal change. It is tragic that where at its birth, the TRC's envisioning of a radically different future inspired many people with hope, now it has left people disillusioned and frustrated about the effects it has had on their actual lives.

⁴² Here, I paraphrase Mark Fleishman at the International Federation for Theatre Research conference "Theatre in Africa/Africa in Theatre," University of Stellenbosch, South Africa, July 2007.

⁴³ Although in 1996 Mbeki confirmed the non-racialist principle of the new Constitution, his "Two Nations" speech, held in 1998 on the occasion of a parliamentary debate on reconciliation and nation-building, contrasts sharply with the post-apartheid ideal of a "rainbow nation." Mbeki talked about the division of South Africa into a white rich nation and a poor black one. He was right that the division between rich and poor is largely racially defined; however, his speech effectively re-institutionalised race, a trend that has continued in a series of laws that emphasise racial, rather than socio-economic categories. On the revival of racial classification in post-apartheid South Africa, see the 2006 AfriForum report by Kallie Kriel, <<http://www.afriforum.co.za/dokumente/the%20revival%20of%20race.pdf>>, accessed 5 April 2008.

main challenge for South African artists today is to create new sites at which the battle over the past can be fought without the impediment of nationalist, racist or nativist ideologies. A space where people can 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. Parry is right that, rather than aligning it with reconciliation, remembrance of the past should be joined with a critique of the contemporary condition: "For our best hope for universal emancipation lies in remaining unreconciled to the past and unconsolated by the present" (2004: 193). The furies' laments are powerful reminders of this.