

‘A Splintering and Shattering Activity’: Race, Reconciliation, and the Work of Mourning

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People are always trying to fool themselves, for one reason or another. The trick is to know it. Everybody has a tendency to hold onto what you think you know...you don't like to have your certainties disturbed. But life is always smashing you into pieces...you pick it up and start again. And in all that I think something else begins to happen, which is a kind of good-natured reconciliation, an awareness that everything is much vaster than you can imagine—much worse and much better.

James Baldwin, 1980 interview on the television show *Faces*<sup>1</sup>

The horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle.

David Foster Wallace, “Some Remarks on Kafka’s Funniness”

In the late morning on Saturday, November 3, 1979 a caravan of Ku Klux Klansmen steered its way through the streets of Greensboro, North Carolina. The thirty-five individuals packed inside the nine automobiles had planned to disrupt a scheduled rally in a black public housing neighborhood planned by the Communist Workers Party (CWP), which had been organizing mill and cafeteria workers along with the Greensboro Association for Poor People (GAPP). Ostensibly this disruption was to be limited to throwing eggs and making speeches, but the pistols and shotguns packed into each vehicle bespoke other possibilities. As the first car—with its Confederate flag license plate—pushed its way into the protesters’ midst, a shouting

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<sup>1</sup> Video available at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xb\\_NbdeE2zU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xb_NbdeE2zU)

match broke out. The verbal confrontation between the demonstrators and the white supremacists quickly escalated to violence, and five CWP members and activists were shot dead. Ten others were wounded.

Twenty-five years later, after juries had twice acquitted the Klansmen of all charges, and after extensive grassroots organizing, nine individuals were sworn in during a public ceremony to create the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission (GTRC). Over the course of the next fifteen months, the Commission heard public testimony from surviving members of the CWP, the KKK, and others associated with the events of 1979 and their aftermath. Upon completion of a final report, the organizing forces behind the Commission sponsored a series of town hall meetings to discuss the process and its results. The memory of the Commission continues to have a presence in Greensboro, and has inspired similar efforts in other places.

What do these experiences in a southern town have to teach us about how democratic societies can mourn traumatic events in their histories? In particular, what do these efforts say about how American citizens can confront the historical and ongoing conflicts surrounding race? What does the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission—its inception, its operation, and its afterlife in the community—have to say about how citizens can work through living legacies of racial violence and discrimination, along with the hatred, fear, distrust, and distorted communication that still circulates around the color line? What kind of mourning work is being displayed here, and what are its potential effects on the present and future life of the American polity?

The connection between mourning and politics has a long history. As far back as Thucydides' account of Pericles' funeral oration, there has been a tight link between rites of

citizenship and rites of public mourning.<sup>2</sup> Public responses to loss and grief generate inter-group solidarity and often galvanize political struggles for redress and even revolution (Bouvard, 1994; Ashraf and Banuazizi, 1985). The cultural narratives in which citizens find themselves are studded with moments of loss, grief, mourning and disavowal, and interpretations of these moments affect political attitudes, behavior, and identities in the present (Polletta, 1998; Hall, 2005). Civic rituals of remembrance provide objects of identification that in turn shape collective identity (Nora, 1989). Renewed contestation over these rituals and rites provides fresh evidence for William Faulkner's oft-quoted (and oft-misquoted) remark that "the past is never dead. In fact it is not even past" (1975). To believe otherwise is to succumb to what James Baldwin called a "sentimental error" that "the past is...forgotten." As Baldwin puts it starkly,

"It is not question of memory. Oedipus did not remember the thongs that bound his feet; nevertheless marks they left testified to that doom toward which his feet were leading him. The man does not remember the hand that struck him, the darkness that frightened him, as a child; nevertheless, the hand and the darkness remain with him, indivisible from himself forever, part of the passion that drives him..." (1984, 29).

It is not a matter (solely) of memory—individual and collective—because events in the past press themselves, in both conscious and unconscious ways, into collective identities in the present (Booth, 1999 and 2006; Griffin, 2004; McAfee, 2008). Public acts of recollection are also acts of selective identification with certain events alongside an active forgetting of others (Wolin, 1989). In many respects the cultural process of recalling a violent, traumatic past seems reminiscent of what Freud called the work of mourning (*Trauerarbeit*), a process in which the "memories and expectations" associated with the lost object are brought up in order for the individual to "recover both what is essential from the past and what is essentially past" (1953, 152). It is

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<sup>2</sup> This connection is still tight today - witness for instance the description of presidents as "mourners-in-chief" in the wake of violent events or at the funerals for influential citizens. For examples of these contemporary funeral orations see the speeches of President Bush in the days after September 11<sup>th</sup> and Hurricane Katrina, or President Obama following the shootings at Ft. Hood and Tucson, Arizona. See Fastenberg, 2011, and note the language of putting partisan politics "on hold" during the period of "national mourning."

through these repeated acts of mourning that individual character is formed: “the character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes and...it contains the history of these object-choices” (1923, 290).

Yet how should we think about the work of mourning in public or political terms? What is the connection—if any—between civic rituals of remembrance and the work of mourning as described by psychoanalysis? Jürgen Habermas has offered that the “task” of mourning a violent past takes the form of continual, public scrutiny of the “subtle capillary ramifications” of a collectivity’s historical “milieu” (1988; see also McCarthy, 2002). This milieu forms a common “life-context” that links the past and the present. For Habermas democratic citizens bear a special burden of mourning in the wake of traumatic events, involving a commitment to developing a “keenly scrutinizing attitude” towards “identity-creating traditions” with a “suspicious gaze made wise by...moral catastrophe.” In a similar vein, Dominick LaCapra has described mourning in terms of a public process of working through the past that attempts to undo cycles of violence and disavowal. Mourning the legacies of a violent history, in his words, can allow “for critical judgment and a reinvestment in life, notably social and civic life with its demands, responsibilities, and norms requiring respectful recognition and consideration for others” (1999, 716). Democratic norms such as equal respect depend upon these labors of mourning, which Eric Santner has described as the “integration of damage, loss, disorientation, (and) decentered-ness into a transformed structure of identity” (1993, xiii). Each of these accounts emphasizes a tight link between civic rituals of remembrance and mourning and a normative vision for democratic identity shaped by experiences of trauma, sensitive to the conflicted demands of a violent past, and skeptical of coherent or settled accounts of both history and identity.

The challenge for these and related projects within social and political theory has been not only to provide a compelling account of mourning as a political and cultural phenomenon, but to locate civic practices and institutions that embody this integrative work of mourning.<sup>3</sup> Along these lines, the recent work of Simon Stow has been both provocative and invaluable (2007; 2010). In his most recent work, Stow has charted out competing traditions of public mourning and demonstrated how these traditions correspond with different conceptions of democratic politics and identity. In the process Stow has described how African American mourning traditions generated countless acts of courageous resistance in the struggles against slavery and for civil rights, but also continue to offer a “democratic pedagogy” that can inform and guide American public life in the present. Similar to Santner, Stow describes this democratic pedagogy in terms of the acceptance of ambivalence and disorientation, and the adoption of a “double consciousness” about race, history and identity. While Stow worries that the African American tradition of critical, tragic mourning is in relative decline, his work concludes with an invitation to think beyond this particular tradition and towards alternative practices of mourning.

In what follows, I take up this invitation for theorizing a connection between mourning and democracy. In section one I examine Stow’s typology of mourning and offer a critical supplement to his account of the African American funeral tradition and its “exemplars” such as Frederick Douglass and Joseph Lowery. On my reading, Stow overstates the case for this tradition and, hence, undertheorizes the democratic pedagogy it offers. In the interests of providing an “agonistic antidote” to amnesic and romanticized accounts of American history and democratic identity, Stow neglects to treat the African American funeral tradition as an ambivalent object—betraying a certain leftist nostalgia for a clarion, critical voice and (ironically)

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<sup>3</sup> The work of Bonnie Honig is notable here (2001, 2009). For instance see her reflections (2001) on immigration, national identity, and mourning. Honig clearly emphasizes that narratives of mourning and identity are by themselves inadequate. As she puts it, “we must attend to the roles of institutions, culture, community and politics in projects of transition” (68). I return to Honig’s work below.

downplaying the democratic lesson of ambivalence that he offers the reader. Stow acknowledges the danger that modeling public mourning practices on this tradition might serve to fetishize conflict over and against other forms of democratic engagement, yet his examples and his (implicit) theory of mourning combine to make his overall account insufficiently attentive to this possibility. This interpretation is offered in a spirit of antagonistic indebtedness (Connolly, 2002) because I both share Stow's admiration for how rituals of public mourning supported the long (and ongoing) struggle for legal recognition and social status across racial boundaries, and because I also share Stow's goals of articulating a democratic pedagogy based on ambivalent and complicated attachment to the violent history of the American polity.

In section two, I move out from Stow's work to pursue this democratic pedagogy by other means. In particular, I supplement Stow's implicit account of mourning with an explicit theory drawn from the work of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein. I argue that Klein's work is especially insightful regarding the dilemmas surrounding public rituals and practices of mourning. For Klein, mourning is not only a means of confronting and overcoming loss, but is also about losing certain strategies for living in the world and relating to others. Mourning involves giving up not only the lost object, but also implies letting go of the defenses and fantasies that alleviate our anxiety over this loss and that keep us from reflecting on and living with trauma. The work of mourning, therefore, is a means of mitigating cognitive dogmatism and nurturing a capacity for facing our history and our selves in a more open and healthy way (Cocks, 2004; Gibson, 2006). With debts to Klein, I argue that the work of public mourning could be considered as less a limited response to particular loss—one that will resolve itself after a certain lapse of time—than as an iterable process of civic identity formation through recognition of, and reflection on, formative traumas in the polity.

In section three, I return to the experience of the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission in order to give a practical, institutional face to the theory of mourning that I take from Klein. I argue that the essential ambivalence (or *multi-valence*) of truth commissions can better inculcate the virtues of double consciousness and critical responsiveness that Stow rightly identifies as constitutive components of a tragic mode of mourning. TRCs can become, in effect, internalized reflecting objects that put into circulation habits of critical judgment, which mitigate tendencies towards demonization and other forms of persecutory politics. In this respect, they can provide public space for a work of mourning understood as a process of integrating violent events into a revised understanding of collective history and democratic identity. This approach carries its own dangers—an emphasis on “reconciliation” can serve to conceal conflicts and disagreements as much as it might reveal or work through them. Yet, drawing from the experience of Greensboro, I argue that the promise of TRCs as practices of mourning is not the achievement of harmonious reconciliation with the past so much as the possibility of nurturing civic habits of reflection on living legacies of trauma and suffering. By integrating narratives of trauma into the institutions and collective narratives of the polity, we might then cultivate a healthier and more generous form of civic identity. The reconciliation on offer here is closer to what Baldwin called “good-natured” reconciliation—the awareness that things are “both much worse and much better” than we had realized. To paraphrase David Foster Wallace, the horrific struggle to create democratic citizens by this iterable activity results in democratic selves whose humanity is inseparable from this struggle.

## 1. African American Mourning and the Democratic Pedagogy of Double Consciousness

The task which the psychoanalytic method seeks to perform may be formulated in many ways, which are, however, in their essence equivalent. It may, for instance, be stated thus: the task of treatment is to remove the amnesias. When all gaps in memory have been filled in, all the enigmatic products of mental life elucidated, the continuance and even renewal of the morbid condition are made impossible.

—Sigmund Freud, “Psychoanalytic Procedure”

Stow begins his account of African American mourning practices by disaggregating mourning practices into distinct traditions. Stow refers to two dominant strains—or “ideal types” (681)—of public mourning: the romantic and the tragic. Each mode of public mourning corresponds, moreover, to a distinct conception of democratic practice and identity, creating a twofold typology. Romantic public mourning serves to suppress conflict “through a narrative of higher unity” (2010, 682). Such rituals incorporate loss into a coherent account of collective identity, heroizing the dead and offering identity-boundary maintenance through a rhetorical enactment of a collective subject. Echoing Plato’s *Menexenus*, Stow argues that the romantic style of mourning ‘demands little’ of its audience; instead it is “singular in vision, uncritical, purely comforting, and historically ubiquitous” (2010, 682; Plato, 1989). Romantic public mourning intensifies normalizing pressures within political life, serving to marginalize disagreement and conflict within the polis (2010, 682; Loraux, 1986 and 2002). Both the honored dead and the living are stripped of their ambivalence. Minority views that challenge romantic accounts are accordingly threatened with exclusion and “frequently demonized” (2010, 682). Stow associates this style of mourning with a consensus-oriented view of democratic politics (Rawls 1993, Habermas 1992), which due to its focus on agreement instead of *stasis*, amounts to a depoliticization of public life (Connolly, 2005; Mouffe 2005, Honig, 1993 and 2001).

In contrast to the normalizing and depoliticizing pressures of romantic public mourning, Stow offers the ideal type of *tragic* public mourning, which generates an agonistic understanding

of democracy “in which conflict and disagreement are recognized as central to democratic politics” (2010, 682). Tragic public mourning is “pluralistic, critical, and self-consciously political” (2010, 682). It eschews a maudlin sentimentalization of loss in favor of a tragic mode of response that emphasizes paradox, frustration, and conflict. Above all, a tragic style of public mourning “seeks to generate ambivalence in its audience as a productive response” to loss (2010, 683). Ambivalence—or the “prevalence of duality over unity” (Seaford 1995)—casts into doubt both romantic readings of loss and the coherence of a collective subject founded upon such readings. Stow links the tragic mode of public mourning to the Great Dionysia, the ancient Athenian festival where the Attic tragedies were first performed. The festival—with its civic rituals supporting a consensus versus of Athenian identity alongside dramatic performances obsessed with dilemma, conflict, and *stasis*—was an ambivalent experience that offered a democratic pedagogy to its audience by demonstrating the partiality of any viewpoint and the ill consequences of moral and political blindness (Zeitlin, 1985, Goldhill 2004, Euben, 1986). The festival cultivated ambivalence within its audience and, in so doing, “helped the citizenry negotiate the inevitable and irreconcilable tensions of democratic life” (Stow, 2010, 683; see also Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, 1998). Central to this pedagogy was the function of “discrepant awareness”—an asymmetry of knowledge between actors and audience that demonstrated the jaundiced eye of individual perspectives (2010, 683; Zeitlin 1985, 75). The Great Dionysia “represented the polis to itself,” complete with its fractures and social cleavages (Goldhill, 2004; Monoson, 2000).

Stow draws a red line between the Athenian dramatic festival, a tragic style of public mourning, and recent work within democratic theory, such as William Connolly’s, that emphasizes ambivalence, contingency, and conflict as ineliminable features of political life (Connolly, 1991 and 2005). In particular, Connolly’s emphasis on an ethos of “critical

responsiveness” and a “bicameral” orientation to political life echo the pluralistic and agonistic response to loss and death within the tragic tradition of mourning. Agonistic democratic theory seeks means of countering the normalizing pressures inherent to romantic accounts of loss that feed cultural and political identities in denial over their partiality and incoherence.

It is on the basis of this typology that Stow examines an African American mourning tradition that is both “tragic and self-consciously political” (2010, 681; see also Barrett, 1995 and 1998). This tradition grew out of the experiences of oppression under slavery and coalesced into a political force that galvanized struggles against *de facto* and *de jure* segregation and discrimination. Stow traces the intimate connection between violent death and African American identity, a connection that nurtured a “bicameral perspective” towards death within the black community (2010, 683). African American funerals were understood as “homegoings,” and were occasions not only for sadness but “a kind of joy about the release from pain” (2010, 683; Roediger, 1981, 177). This “double consciousness” of death was generative of a tragic insight into American life—what W.E.B. Du Bois called “second sight” (Dubois, 2003; West, 1989). The ambivalence of African American responses to death found form in the Sorrow Songs, “these weird old songs in which the soul of black folk spoke to men” (Du Bois, 2003). The Sorrow Songs displayed a complex mix of sadness and hope, lamentation and resistance (Crouch 1995; Dubois 2003). They are songs of “death and suffering,” the “music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment” (2003, 180). Yet, as Dubois put it, within the Sorrow Songs there is also an “unvoiced longing toward a truer world,” a longing that “breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things” (2003, 186). Stow cautions against a messianic or chiliastic reading of this hope, however. Instead of offering a romantic vision of historical fulfillment, the expressions of hope within the Sorrow Songs are inseparable from a tragic awareness of hopes dashed. It is, in the words of Eddie Glaude Jr., a “hope against hope” (2010, 684).

According to Stow, the ambivalence of “hope against hope” within the African American tradition of public mourning operated in the American polity in a structurally similar way to how Greek tragedy worked at Athens. By offering its audience the doubled consciousness of oppression, conflict and violence alongside a hopeful expectancy, African American mourning practices formed a democratic pedagogy for all American citizens, regardless of race. These practices generated inter- and cross-group solidarity and galvanized countless acts of courageous resistance to slavery and legal discrimination (Blassingame, 1979; Fabre, 1994). They also engendered a mode of “critical remembrance” that challenged dominant interpretations of American history and identity (Stow, 2010, 688).

The historical and contemporary “exemplars” of this mourning tradition—from Frederick Douglass to Joseph Lowery—have been insistent, critical voices in the polity, continuously calling its citizens to respond to the tragic aspects of American life. Frederick Douglass’ iterated funeral orations for Abraham Lincoln, for instance, were not occasions for a romantic eulogy of the dead president, but agonistic reminders that fought against “historical amnesia” and sentimental portrayals of the Civil War that obscured ongoing conflicts and struggles. In the years following the Civil War, Douglass repeatedly refused a hagiographic or romantic frame for Lincoln’s life and death. In a speech before Congress in 1876, Douglass excoriated Lincoln as “the white man’s president” (2006, 74). In so doing Douglas “performed something akin to the productive disorientation of tragic theater” (Stow, 2010, 688), “forcing [his audience] to reconsider their own position” (2010, 687). Douglass’ funeral orations offer a “disagreeable mirror” that exposes habits of denial and disavowal within the audience (Baldwin, 1985, 408). The disagreeable mirror disrupts what James Baldwin called “innocence,” which is the fact that Americans “do not know...and do not want to know” the full extent of trauma and violence within their history (1991, 10; see also Shulman, 2008b, 140).

For Stow, contemporary exemplars of the African American mourning tradition, such as Joseph Lowery, consciously take on the duality of perspectives this tradition requires, providing “an agonistic antidote to the democratically poisonous ideological commitment to consensus to racial politics” (692). Yet the controversy surrounding Lowery’s embodiment of this tradition at the funeral for Coretta Scott King (Noonan, 2006; Washington, 2006), during which he tied King’s resistance to war to a critique of the ongoing Iraq War, causes Stow to wonder if the tradition of African American mourning is in relative decline. Due to social and theological changes within the African American community—including the rise of the so-called “prosperity gospel” (Dyson, 2008)—the salience of an insistently critical and agonistic tradition seems to be waning. Both the general backlash to Lowery’s (and Jimmy Carter’s) remarks among some white Americans, along with an overall decline within African American churches of this tragic mode of engagement, seem to show Lowery to be a relic of an earlier time and a representative of a fading tradition. These developments undermine a democratic pedagogy of tragic ambivalence and weaken resistance to romanticized accounts of loss, trauma, and conflict in the polity. In a vacuum of critical, tragic voices, American citizens are susceptible to historical amnesia and a truncated and uncritical vision of collective identity. For Stow this amnesia is typified by rising discourses of a “post-racial” America, which is ominously “redolent” of the narratives of reconciliation following the Civil War, and which distorts ongoing struggles against domination and inequality (2010, 694).

Stow’s disaggregation of public mourning into competing traditions, his development of a twofold typology that links these traditions to distinct conceptions of democratic politics and identity, and his subtle treatment of African American mourning practices as an instantiation of the tragic mode of mourning clearly form a valuable contribution to debates about the link between mourning and politics. Moreover, Stow’s description of a democratic pedagogy drawn

from an acceptance of ambivalence and conflict has obvious merit in a polity that is marked not only by historical traumas of tragic proportions but by deep and persistent inequities in the present. By describing a democratic pedagogy tied to traditions of public mourning, Stow reveals the possibility of a broader responsiveness to trauma, conflict, and loss that, in turn, nurtures a salutary scrutiny of our common civic life.

Yet there remain some difficulties with Stow's account. His essay on public mourning is, fittingly enough, framed as "something of a eulogy" (2010, 694). With the African American tradition of public mourning—"one of the last best hopes for inculcating a tragic perspective"—in relative decline, Stow intends to honor this tradition while challenging others to carry on the work in new ways. What Stow does not admit, however, is the possibility that he has himself adopted the role of a "romantic" eulogist, with all of the required rhetorical tropes inherent to this role. Namely, the "lost" object of the eulogy—the African American tragic mourning tradition and its exemplars—has been embellished and stripped of its deeper ambivalence.

By insisting upon "a" coherent tradition that is now in decline, Stow approaches a normalization of African American mourning practices and a hypostatization of the roles inherent to these practices.<sup>4</sup> Of course such dangers accompany any attempt to describe cultural identity or traditions, and unlike a full-throated romantic eulogy Stow's tragic ethos of critical responsiveness serves as a perpetual reminder to be skeptical of claims to coherence. Yet in his attempts to identify with a tradition of critical, agonistic mourning, Stow effectively heroizes this tradition's exemplars and, in the process, obscures their ambiguity. For instance, Stow acknowledges that there is "something of a paradox" with regards to his claims about Frederick

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Diana Taylor on the risks of depoliticization that accompany mourning rites/acts, based on how such roles as the 'aggrieved mother' serve to simultaneously facilitate and stunt the impact of these actions. Taylor's primary example is the Mothers of the Disappeared in Argentina, yet witness also the rise and precipitous fall of Cindy Sheehan as a public figure in the United States. Once Sheehan was no longer seen only as a "grieving mother," her presence in political discourse quickly evaporated. See also Honig (forthcoming). In his description of the funeral for Emmitt Till, Stow misses how it was the very *violation* of roles and norms surrounding burial that lent Till's mother's action such power.

Douglas, whose “unequivocal commitment” to a definite view of the Civil War seems to conflict with the emphasis on tragic ambivalence and the essential partiality of any individual viewpoint (2010, 687). Yet Stow moves on from this paradox, “resolving” the tension with a claim about Douglass’ particular “genius,” which consists of an agonistic respect or forbearance towards his enemies (2010, 687). As Stow puts it, “Douglass’ position required not that he recognize the legitimacy of white supremacy as a political doctrine, but simply the legitimacy of those who held that position *to argue* for their viewpoint” (2010, 687, emphasis in original). Douglass’ “democratic authority” is seen to rest on a prophetic voice that disturbs conventions and incites continuing political contestation rather than foreclosing conflict (Shulman, 2008a, 718). Yet this reading rescues Douglass’ politics at the expense of his ambivalence. It seems that Douglass’ prophetic register, as much as it emphasizes a critical uprooting of convention, also had moments of closure and dogmatic certainty. Stow’s reading resolves these tensions instead of reading “Frederick Douglass” as a conflicted *collection* of voices. For instance, Douglass was ambivalent if not wildly inconsistent in his attitude towards Lincoln, writing in 1893 that the latter was “one whom I could love, honor, and trust without reserve and doubt” (1994, 786). In his speeches Douglass was moreover often prone to jeremiadic flights of demonization and condemnation alongside optimistic portrayals of humanity’s progress (Myers, 2010).<sup>5</sup>

Ironically, Stow’s invocation of Douglass’ “genius” deploys one of the very romantic tropes that he had earlier singled out for criticism (Brogan, 1993). This tendency towards demonization reappears in Stow’s treatment of Lowery and the funeral of Coretta Scott King. Stow forwards Lowery’s indignation at the controversy following his eulogy, noting Lowery’s claim that those “who are criticizing me don’t understand the [tradition] of a black funeral” (H.R.

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<sup>5</sup> See Stow’s footnote about Myers on 689. Adding to Douglass’ complexity were his “prophecies” about the disappearance of distinct racial categories through intermarriage See Douglass, “The Future of the Colored Race.”

Harris, 2006). At a peace rally two months after the King funeral, Lowery upped the rhetorical stakes of the conflict, asking “by what moral authority do they tell us how to conduct a black funeral...In the black church, at a funeral, we celebrate the life of the dead, but then we challenge those who are living to pick up the mantle and carry on the work” (2006). Stow understands criticism of Lowery as an outgrowth of a “romantic understanding of racial politics,” but Stow does not comment on the fact that Lowery seemingly uses the (tragic, critical) tradition of public mourning to immunize himself *against* criticism, rather than accepting the contingency and risk of his parrhesiastic utterances (Foucault, 2010).

Finally, the circumscription of his exemplars’ ambivalence also folds back into Stow’s reading of the Sorrow Songs. Recall that Stow goes to some length to argue that Du Bois’ faith in justice does not index a messianic expectation of fulfillment. Stow resolves *this* tension by replacing a romantic “faith in ultimate justice” with a more agonistic and acceptable “regulative ideal” of “hope against hope” (2010, 684; Glaude, Jr. 2008). Stow truncates his analysis by downplaying the romantic notes in the African American funeral tradition.

Again, the irony of this move is that it seems to cut against Stow’s claims about the salutary experiences of ambivalence. What is more is that these moves by Stow seem unnecessary. Wouldn’t Stow’s democratic pedagogy have been enriched by the inclusion of these—now marginalized—voices of fulfillment and faith? Wouldn’t the democratic “lesson” of ambivalence and partiality of perspectives have been *deepened* by the inclusion of messianic notes alongside those of tragic pessimism? The difficulty here, it seems, is that Stow *himself* is conflicted and ambivalent. He is committed to substantive goals of racial justice and the social advancement of heretofore marginalized groups—for instance see his admission that the emergence of a “prosperous black middle class” is to be “celebrated” (2010, 694)—and hence he is committed to modes of public mourning insofar as they make possible these gains. Yet he

cannot identify with the moments of this tradition that seem to push beyond ambivalence towards a “ultimate faith” in justice. Therefore he downplays the seemingly transcendent faith of the Sorrow Songs, and he excuses Douglass’ flights of “demonization” as necessary rhetorical weapons in a struggle against obvious wrongs. However, this internal conflict causes Stow’s essay to rove across the typology of public mourning he has described—alternately tragic and romantic, agonistic and consensualist.<sup>6</sup>

Stow’s (implicit) account of mourning runs roughly as follows. Tragic, performative reminders of loss complicate bonds of attachment and identification supporting collective identity; these reminders of conflict create an awareness of ambivalence that in turn nurtures a democratic ethos of critical responsiveness and agonistic respect. Yet Stow admits that there are pressures within mourning narratives towards an embellishment of the lost object that flattens out its ambivalence and nurtures both cognitive and political dogmatism. As we have seen, Stow’s account is not itself immune to these pressures; it therefore does not fully acknowledge the deep imbrication of the romantic and tragic modes of mourning. Below I argue that the work of the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein is more sensitive to these dangers of imbrication; as such it provides the basis for a reconceptualization of public mourning and a re-invigoration of its democratic pedagogy.

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<sup>6</sup> For instance see Stow’s (Habermasian) description of Douglass’ approach to public discourse: “His eulogies...demanded that those who had hitherto considered their position natural, given and unassailable, defend it against his more compelling arguments. By inviting his white audience to engage him in reasoned argument, moreover, Douglass enmeshed them in a performative contradiction: undermining white supremacist claims by forcing them to recognize him as a person worthy of reasoned engagement” (687).

## 2. Melanie Klein and the Work of Mourning

Not until the object is loved as a *whole* can its loss be felt as a whole.

—Melanie Klein, *A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States*

When *parresia* is lacking, men, citizens, are all doomed to the master's madness. And then nothing is more painful than to have to be mad with the mad.

—Michel Foucault, *Government of Self and Others*

It may seem misguided to turn away from social theory to psychoanalytic theory given the directly political concerns of this paper. Despite the (increasingly) frequent use of Freud, Klein, Lacan, Winnicott and others within political theory over the past several decades (Alford, 1989 and 1994; Butler, 1997 and 2004; Honig, 2001; LaCapra, 1998 and 1999; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; McAfee, 2003; Rogin, 1975 and 1987; Whitebook, 1996; Žizek, 1999 and 2000), there remains a valid anxiety that such a move amounts to reducing the political to the therapeutic, or relying too much on an abstract account of subjectivity that—at least in some iterations—does not take into consideration history, culture, or power (Brown, 1995). In the wake of Stow's reading of mourning, tragedy, and ambivalence, however, there are two clear reasons for this turn to Klein.<sup>7</sup> The first is that her work has what Stow would recognize as a 'tragic' character: she is, for instance, simultaneously more pessimistic and more hopeful about human relationships than was Freud (Alford, 1989, 10-11). Like the Athenian tragic festival, Klein's work cultivates "discrepant awareness"—an understanding of the unconscious slips and subterranean forces that penetrate through our conscious experience. This ambivalence carries through into Klein's description of individual psychology, which is rent between powerful forces of hatred, love, guilt,

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<sup>7</sup> More general justifications of the turn to psychoanalysis have been offered by Noelle McAfee, Hanna Segal, Joel Kovel, and Fred Alford (among others). For McAfee, there is not a "homology" between the psychoanalytic sphere and the political public sphere, but there is a connection "between the macro and the micro...our particular and collective traumas *show up* in the sociosymbolic public sphere. That is where they circulate" (2008, 24). Along similar lines, Hanna Segal notes the "mutual projective identifications imbued with deadly hostility" that circulate in our social world (2007, 210)—animosities that cannot easily be explained through structural or institutional analysis. For Kovel, the ineliminably fantastical elements of public and political life necessitate a wide "semantic range" that psychoanalysis can provide, namely because "it takes into account the full range of human experiences" (1970, 3). For Alford, even those who are completely skeptical of psychoanalysis can find insight into collective and individual life through the work of Melanie Klein, which, since it can be interpreted "as an account of the passions" it is connected "to nonpsychoanalytic accounts of subjectivity that many find compelling" (1989, 13).

paranoia, aggression and reparation. Secondly, for Klein there is an intimate connection between mourning and identity. In fact it is fair to say that, for Klein, the individual *comes into being* through mourning. On Klein's reading, loss and grief mark a "crossroads" of development that we encounter "again and again" throughout our lives (1975, 320). Development of identity and character is dependent on successfully—and repeatedly—working through painful grief and deprivation that spring from our attachments with others.

For Klein, individuals experience loss in different ways and within different psychological "positions"—what she calls the "paranoid-schizoid" and the "depressive" positions. These two dominant positions of psychic life correspond nearly perfectly with Stow's typology of public mourning practices. Within the depressive position, the individual comes to a tragic acceptance not only regarding the brute fact of loss, but also of the internal conflicts that this loss reveals. The depressive position involves a dawning awareness of ambivalence within our objects of attachment and an integration of the powerful affects that are actuated by these attachments. Bedeviling this process of working through is our tragic susceptibility to pathological habits of mind and character that keep us from acknowledging the simultaneous presence of love and hate within our objects of attachment; this is Klein's paranoid-schizoid position. The depressive position marks the tragic awareness and acknowledgement of ambivalence, conflict, and plurality—not only within accounts of the past but also within our inter-personal lives. The paranoid-schizoid position, on the other hand, is dominated by persecutory fears and anxieties, and both our internal and external worlds are split into 'all good' and 'all bad' components. The work of mourning is the process of moving from the paranoid-schizoid to the depressive position, becoming what Donald Winnicott referred to as someone "who is capable of being depressed" (1986, 244). In Klein's hands, then, mourning is not simply a process of accepting death and moving on; it is the process of mitigating the hatred, fear, envy and greed of the paranoid-

schizoid position through acts of acknowledgment that deepen our awareness of conflict, paradox, and ambivalence (Klein, 1975; Alford, 1989).<sup>8</sup> Klein's work helps us to see the imbrication between romantic and tragic responses to loss—both individual and collective—and the divided and conflicted nature of individual subjectivity that makes this imbrication problematic for our common life together.

The depressive position has a biological basis, as it first appears when the infant achieves object permanence sometime toward the end of the first year of life. Before this point, according to Klein, object relations are not with whole persons but with distinct “parts” of our external environment. From the moment of birth a complex inner world is being built up in the child's mind corresponding to its experiences in the world. As Klein puts it, “the ego is constantly absorbing into itself the whole external world” (1975, 266). The first ‘part-objects’ are internalized and become aspects of the infant's nascent self. For Klein, the objects are shaded—or ‘interpreted’—by the wild, uncontrollable needs of the infant: the “good” object is identified with sustenance and nurturing, while the “bad” object is identified with deprivation and stress. It is only with the development of object permanence that the individual can begin to acknowledge that these split objects form a larger whole. As Klein puts it, “with the introduction of the complete object...the loved and hated aspects of the mother are no longer felt to be so widely separated and the result is an increased fear of loss, states akin to mourning, and a strong feeling of guilt” (1975, 14). This guilt becomes the basis for acts of “reparation:”

“When the infant feels that his destructive impulses and fantasies are directed against the complete person of his loved object, guilt arises in full strength and together with that, the overriding urge to repair, preserve or revive the love injured object” (1975, 74)

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<sup>8</sup> Fred Alford has likened Klein's understanding of ego-integration to the integration of the Furies into the Athenian polis at the end of the *Oresteia*. On Alford's reading, the Furies' anger is modified or mitigated—but not eliminated—by inclusion in the civic rites. Just as the “healthy” polis will avoid denial of the disintegrative demands for crude justice articulated by the Furies, and instead find room for this “archaic” anger and aggression.

For Klein, the depressive position is defined not only by the appearance of the whole object, but also by the appearance of subjective care and concern for this object *as an other*. Within the depressive position, the individual has to let go of the image of an ideal or pure object. As a result, conflicts with one's objects are not denied or pushed out of consciousness, but are made conscious for the first time. As Klein puts it, steps in ego integration result "in a greater capacity...to acknowledge the increasingly poignant psychic reality" (1975, 73). As the ego increases its ability to live with the competing and conflicted demands of its objects and its passions, the individual begins to develop the facilities for reparation and love. The depressive position in this respect marks a mitigation of cognitive and emotional dogmatism; it becomes the embryonic foundation of a "good-natured reconciliation" to the complexity of human interaction.

In contrast to the depressive position, the paranoid-schizoid position is characterized by a weak ego, which is unable to tolerate the co-presence of good and bad objects, and which thereby splits the objects and keeps them separate in the mind. Splitting the objects in this way is the infant's first means of defense against the bewildering array of internal and external stimulations. This compromised ego creates "larger than life" people and emotions, "unmodified by their opposites"(Segal, 1992, 34). Even though both the good and bad objects have been introjected, the latter are constantly seen to threaten the former, lending the 'paranoid' quality to the infant's mind. The infant feels persecuted and attacked, and in turn musters its meager defenses to fight against these threats.

However, if these experiences were restricted to the first months of life, it would hardly be worth Klein's, or our, attention. For Klein, the paranoid-schizoid position is a continual temptation throughout our lives. The stresses and anxieties accompanying deeply felt losses especially draw us back to the "crossroads" of development. Within the paranoid-schizoid position, the lost object assumes an outsized character, and we feel compelled to defend it at all

costs from internal and external threats. We thereby project the hatred that is mixed up with the object into another object, or we absorb it into the ego and enter a period of self-loathing. The one-sided, unblemished object *requires* a corresponding source of frustration and persecution. The depressive acknowledgment of ambivalence within our objects of attachment is a disintegrative or shattering experience, and in an effort to resolve the “anxiety of disintegration” we deny or split off conflicts in order to “make [the object] beautiful and restore its lost perfection” (1975, 270). Incapable of admitting the object’s ambivalence, we protect it from criticism—both of others and our own. To arrest this cycle, which corresponds closely to Stow’s depiction of “romantic” mourning, we must reintegrate whole, ambivalent objects into our ego. At such moments, we can “bear to realize that the object was not perfect and yet not lose trust and love for (it), nor fear (its) revenge” (1975, 355). This integrative and reparative labor is the work of mourning.

The healthy work of mourning occurs insofar as the individual capacity of reflecting on loss and damage improves and the defenses of idealization, splitting or denial are mitigated. The identification with whole, ambivalent objects populates the individual’s inner world, which becomes an “assembly” of different voices (Klein, 1975, 258). Introjection involves not only the internalization of these external objects, but also the means of internalization itself, facilitating an acknowledgment of the “poignant” reality and allowing for clearer insight into internal and external conflicts. As Klein puts it, the insight gained from integration means that “potentially dangerous parts [of ourselves]... become bearable and diminish” (1975, 232). Integrated personalities take “full responsibility for all feelings and ideas that belong to being alive” (Winnicott, 1989, 82). By contrast, a “failure” of integration occurs “when we need to find the things we disapprove of outside ourselves”—projecting the discomfiting parts of our identity out into a persecutory other (1989, 82). In the words of Winnicott, the person “who is capable of

becoming depressed,” is better able to “find the whole conflict within the self as well as being able to see the whole conflict outside the self, in external (shared) reality” (1986, 243).

It is important to note, however, that the appreciation of tragic ambivalence does lead to paralysis. The acknowledgment of multi-valent conflicts does not make committed action impossible; it merely saturates commitment with reflectiveness, a keenly scrutinizing attitude drawn from an awareness of complexity and tragedy. In Winnicott’s words, integrated (what he calls “democratic”) selves are not afraid of action, but “they have doubts...they are slow in getting the gun in hand and in pulling the trigger. In fact, they miss the bus to the front line, even if when they get there they are the reliable factor...” (1989, 253).

Mourning in the depressive position allows suffering to “become productive,” and stimulates an “enrichment” of the self that is “more capable of appreciating people and things, [and] more tolerant in their relation to others” (Klein, 1975, 360). Klein’s ‘positional’ understanding of intersubjective life, however, gives this “ego-enrichment” a performative and precarious character. Instead of being characterized by inevitably successive “stages,” ego development is positional and, hence, iterative. There is no settled, mature human self but only repeated acts of integration that allow for more reciprocal human interactions. The depressive position is a state of mind to which we habitually return throughout life, as the competing passions of love and hate that navigate us through our relations with others put us in a perpetually refreshed conflict tied to fears of loss and dissolution. At such moments the specter of the paranoid-schizoid position perpetually looms in the background. Because any painful event can set off this process, mourning is an activity that can never be fully finished. For Klein, it is less a temporary injury than it is a way of living and relating to our self and others.

Successful mourning is not only iterable and precarious; it is also dependent upon a supportive environment that legitimates depressive reparation and helps to mitigate manic and

paranoid defenses.<sup>9</sup> The individual's ability to come through the depressive positions depends in crucial respects on their experiences in the external world:

“The poet tells us that ‘nature mourns with the mourner.’ I believe that ‘Nature’ in this connection represents the internal good mother. This experience of mutual sorrow and sympathy in internal relationships, however, is again bound up with external ones. As I have already stated, Mrs. A's greater trust in actual people and things, and help received from the external world, contributed to a relaxing of the manic control over her inner world” (1975, 359)

In situations where the integrative work of mourning has short-circuited, the analytic relationship provides a model for a sympathetic process of mirroring that petitions the ego towards the depressive position. Yet this process is not a gentle “holding” environment; the analyst often must imitate Baldwin's “disagreeable” mirror in order to weaken the grip of persecutory fantasies that keep the analysand from acknowledging the depth of the situation. As Klein puts it, analysis “cannot spare the patient any suffering” (1975, 144). Rather the idea is “to force suffering into consciousness, to avoid more permanent and lasting damage at a later date” (1975, 144). The analytic relationship resembles, then, what Foucault referred to as a “parrhesiastic pact,” in which the individual accepts others “who tell him the truth, even the unpleasant truth” (2010, 163). The analytic relationship is an “agonistic” game of *parrhesia*, which through sympathetic “holding” and mirroring moves the individual “from an insane world determined by misperceptions into a saner world...in which conflict and ambivalence can be faced” (Segal, 2002, 49; on ‘holding’ and ‘playing’ see also Winnicott, 1986). Although psychoanalysis was famously described by one of Freud's analysands as a “talking cure,” its goals are more modest than the language of cure implies. The analytic relationship aims to untangle the resistances and defenses menacing our awareness of self and other rather than to fully resolve conflict at either the intimate or social level. Instead the “not entirely unfeasible task” is to

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<sup>9</sup> Bion's development of object-relations theory is crucial here. His work fleshes out Klein's claims about environmental factors for on the process of “containment” that is first offered by the mother fleshes out Klein's claims about environmental factors for successful mourning. The external environment—including social norms, institutions and practices—either receptively “contains” and modifies aggressive projections and paranoid fears, or it creates a negative resonance chamber where aggression and fear feed upon themselves. See Bion, 1995 and Spillius, 1997.

diminish persecutory anxiety by “break[ing] up the mutual reinforcement that is going on all the time between hatred and fear” (1975, 257). This is the change, in Freud’s words, from “hysterical misery to common unhappiness” (1953, Vol 2, 358). Common unhappiness

Klein’s description of ego-integration via mourning forms the kernel of a more capacious understanding of political life. It corresponds closely with the tragic mode of mourning and its democratic pedagogy, as described by Stow. Citizens who are reflective about loss and are more accepting of ambiguity in their object relations will be more capable of engaging one another outside persecutory or paranoid fantasies (Rogin, 1987; Hofstadter, 1964).<sup>10</sup> Public reflection on trauma initiates a process of working through that, at its best, nurtures an identity that is *itself* reflective about, and habituated to acknowledging ambiguity and conflict in their own lives and within the networks of affiliation and association in which they live, think, and act. In turn, this form of identity will be better equipped to engage in democratic politics in the aftermath traumatic events and within the everyday conflicts of political life.

The picture of rent subjectivity—torn by conflicting demands of objects and passions—in Klein’s work gives an agonistic cast to life that goes missing in aesthetic or romantic responses to loss, even as her approach helps us to understand these latter responses and to see the deep imbrications between tragic and romantic modes of mourning. Yet as Bonnie Honig has noted, the imaged of “divided subjectivity” is, by itself, not a “sufficient condition...to secure a properly open relation to strangeness in ourselves and others” (2001, 57). The “mere awareness” of internal and external division may lead to an enriched ego and greater tolerance for others, “but it may just as well engender and feed a determination to extinguish or contain...strangeness, [or] to scapegoat it” (2001, 57). If the work of tragic mourning involves public acts of working

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<sup>10</sup> In the words of Erik Erikson, individuals with an identity constituted by “active mutuality”—an idea that corresponds with Klein’s picture of internal life constituted as an ambivalent “assembly”—are less likely to “become radical or religious caricatures,” because they “try too hard not to become [such]” (Quoted in Hoover, 2004, 4).

through loss, then “something else” besides a *theory* of mourning is required (2001, 63). In the next section I attempt to describe this “something else” by moving out from Klein to discuss how institutions such as truth and reconciliation commissions can provide the public space for tragic mourning, with its associated democratic pedagogy and its promise of inculcating the civic norms of critical responsiveness and agonistic respect.

### 3. Truth, Reconciliation and the Democratic Pedagogy of Mourning

We were shattered by what we heard...

—Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*

By a thousand stories  
I was scorched  
A new skin.

—Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull*

If the work of mourning involves iterative acts of acknowledging conflict and ambivalence within our intersubjective lives—the internalization of whole, ambivalent objects alongside (and *through*) the development of habits of acknowledging and working through loss—then are there practices and institutions that can give this work a public face, in order that the conflicts surrounding collective history and identity can be identified and in some form worked through? For Stow, this possibility took the form of an alternative tradition of funeral oratory within the African American community that was critical, tragic, and self-consciously political. In this section I discuss truth and reconciliation commissions (TRCs) as an alternative institutional model or set of mourning practices that might better carry out the task of inculcating a tragic perspective. Because TRCs are organized by democratic norms of facing up to the past and allowing heretofore marginalized voices to participate in the discursive space of the polity, they

frame an experience that is by its very nature ambivalent, much like the function that the Great Dionysia served at Athens. Like the tragic festival, TRCs “represent the polis to itself,” by displaying the fissures and conflicts within the polity’s past and present and offering a public space for acknowledging and working through these fissures. TRCs can be understood then as a space and practice of mourning, understood as a process of integrating violent legacies into a revised understanding of collective history and identity. Insofar as they become reflecting objects whose practices and norms are ‘internalized’—seen as a constitutive element of collective identity—they serve a democratically pedagogical function, putting into circulation habits of critical judgment that mitigate tendencies towards demonization and persecutory politics. The Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission—as a citizen-organized, community-led effort—provides an example of how such practices might take shape, how they might operate, and what they might accomplish.

Truth and reconciliation commissions carry many of the dangers associated with ‘romantic’ mourning rituals—the temptation to embellish the lost object, to split-off its discomfiting features (often in the interests of scapegoating and demonization), to aestheticize the loss and the community that has lost, and to replace conflict in the past or present with a depoliticizing discourse of consensus or unity. Yet because TRCs necessarily involve multiple speakers and motives, and because they consist of opposed memories and accounts of the past, they are essentially ambivalent and conflicted objects. Their ‘performance’ can mitigate romantic modes of mourning and to inculcate a tragic perspective within their ‘audience’.

The very idea of a truth and reconciliation commission has been described as a concept “at war with itself,” caught between the seemingly exclusive demands of those seeking truth and those counseling reconciliation (Allen, 1999, 320). Truth and reconciliation are, after all, not mutually reinforcing concepts, either logically or politically. In fact opposition to the TRC

process is often linked with an anxiety that acknowledging the truth of past atrocities will make collective life impossible. Truth seeking—or *parresia*—has an aggressive quality, a “rough, violent, abrupt aspect” (Foucault, 2010, 54). On the other hand, reconciliation—even understood as negative peace (Minow, 2003)—is often achieved only through official declarations of amnesty whereby the agents of violence are given immunity from prosecution for crimes committed during the preceding period. If reconciliation involves amnesty (from the Greek *amnestia*, meaning ‘oblivion’), then it is—at best—in tension with any pursuit of truth; in fact the Greek word for truth, *aletheia*, could be literally translated as “un-forgetting.” Just as Klein, then, hinted at immanent conflicts at the root of intersubjective life, so too do TRCs map a fundamental psychological and political drama.

The very mapping of this drama serves an important democratic function. TRCs offer a public gathering place where marginalized or suppressed accounts of the past can be recognized and integrated into the accounts of collective history (Villa-Vicencio and Verwoerd, 2000). Truth commissions have a perhaps unique ability to not only describe particular events but to investigate and reveal broader social patterns and contexts that made traumatic events possible in the first place. They require a public commitment to confronting unpleasant events in a nation’s history while resisting the often-immense social and political pressures to ‘turn the page’ (see Baglione, 2008).

This desire to ‘move on’ could be described as a civic version of the pleasure principle, the marginalization of painful events, memories, and voices that challenge a romantic, aestheticized version of the nation (Santer, 1992). It is not surprising that political communities—like individual selves—strive to maintain positive self-conceptions (Heisler, 2008). As such, there is a powerful tendency to deny or ignore past traumas, or to interpret violent events in a nation’s history as exceptions or anomalies. Past events that reflect well on the

community are instead prominently invoked and commemorated—we have books and documentaries, for instance, celebrating the ‘greatest generation’ but few if any accounts of the ‘worst.’ When romanticized versions of the past come to define the collective memory and imaginary, violent or traumatic occurrences are reduced to isolated incidents that—due to their supposedly fugitive nature—paint a flawed or inaccurate picture of the community (witness the internment of Japanese and Japanese-Americans during World War II, or the popular discourse surrounding prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib). By contrast, insofar as TRCs promote public reflection on violent or traumatic events in a polity’s past and present, they simultaneously promote the idea that such reflection is a necessary component of democratic politics and identity.

TRCs require, if they are to function at all, a minimal “parrhesiastic pact” between relevant actors—political and religious leaders, perpetrators, victims, ‘bystanders,’ members of the media, etc. Commissions depend upon—and serve to nurture—a willingness to include traumatic or shameful events in the public history of a political community. In the case of South Africa, one of the most significant achievements of the TRC process was, in Desmond Tutu’s words, “to bring events known until now only to the immediately affected communities...into the center of national life” (Quoted in Magarrell and Wesley, 2008, 163). This integrative task cuts against habits of denial that exclude such accounts from broader public recognition. A Commission’s activities and its final report create a revised account of past events that forms the basis for future action. While no report will eliminate all competing interpretations of history, they can serve, in Michael Ignatieff’s phrasing, to effectively “reduce the number of lies” (Chapman and Ball, 2001). By countering current and often heavily distorted frames of the events—what has been described as “mythmaking” (Byman and Van Evera, 1998, Snyder, 2000)—TRCs can articulate a public “universe of comprehensibility” that can serve as the basis

for the relative harmonization of competing versions of the past Ramsbotham et. al, 2005; Hamber and Wilson, 2002). By bridging or weaving together different narratives of the same event, TRCs can restore the ambivalence to accounts of collective history and identity.

Growing enthusiasm within the international community for the reconciliatory effects of TRC *parresia*, however, should be leavened with a healthy dose of skepticism (Mendeloff, 2004). The causal linkages between truth-telling and peaceful reconciliation are murky at best. Yet if truth and reconciliation commissions are seen less as “transitional” spaces or objects (on transitional objects and mourning see Honig, 2001)—a “hinge” between an undemocratic past and a democratic future—and more as an agonistic reminder about the presence of ambivalence and conflict in our public lives, then they might be seen as valuable even if they fail to put conflicts fully to rest. On the basis of Klein’s understanding of mourning and working through, we can see the truth and reconciliation process as a means of acknowledging particular violent events *and* as an institution that forms *habits* of acknowledgment and mourning that form the grounds for a more capacious conception of democratic identity (Minow, 1998 and 2003).<sup>11</sup>

The experience of Greensboro and the GTRC provides evidence for many of these claims and helps to fill in the picture of what an integrative work of mourning might look like. The origins, operations, and final report of the Commission all provoked intense controversy and resistance (Green, 2005c), yet despite this resistance—or perhaps *because* of it—the Commission served a vital democratic function. The very use of the truth and reconciliation process in Greensboro—modeled along the lines of the South African Commission—challenged several

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<sup>11</sup> Reparations movements in the United States parallel this account in many ways. Lawrie Balfour (2003) has argued that the movement to make reparations for slavery is a concrete instance of “resistance to forgetting”—one element “of a larger effort to acknowledge the afterlife of past racial injustices and to eliminate racial disparities in the distribution of power and powerlessness.” Although the overwhelming focus has been on the financial aspects of reparations claims, Balfour demonstrates that their normative and political appeal exceeds the frame of economic contract and brings into relief the “public forgetfulness about slavery” that has “assured liberal-minded citizens that enough [has] been done” to upend the awful legacy of enslavement and legal discrimination. Such assurances promote a blithe denial that the ending of official discrimination has absolved the nation of the heaviest burdens of its past. Therefore the challenge is not to pursue reparations in order to achieve redemption (at last!) but to, as Balfour puts it, “confront the residual assumptions that sustain public silences and feed the resistance to action in matters of racial injustice.”

established myths and assumptions about such processes. It demonstrated, for instance, that the process is not restricted to transitional societies emerging from periods of intense civil conflict, genocide, or war. By creating such an institution within the United States, the citizens of Greensboro demonstrated—in the words of a South African TRC commissioner—that “many so called stabled democracies have a number of skeletons in their closets...[that] there are several historical acts of national shame [in the developed world] that will not go away until the wounds are cut open and addressed”(Quoted in Magarrell and Wesley, 2008, 1). Moreover, as a grassroots campaign organized, financed, and operated through non-state agencies, the GTRC demonstrated that citizen and civil society groups could authorize a respected and serious examination of traumatic events in a community’s past without the official sanction or support of the state. Institutions like the GTRC provide a model for how political communities and citizens might mourn the violent episodes of their history, in the interests of better confronting and working through the effects of these episodes in the present and of cultivating a democratic identity aligned with the virtues of critical responsiveness and agonistic respect. Such processes of mourning mitigate the temptations of romantic defense mechanisms such as splitting, idealization, and demonization that obscure actual conflicts from public view.

Resistance to the GTRC came from a variety of sources. Many prominent Greensboro citizens—including current and former public officials—questioned the objectivity and motives of the groups behind the Commission (Green, 2005a). Others challenged the utility of dredging up the past and re-opening old wounds. Even those who were sympathetic to the traumatic nature of the event focused on the need to heal and ‘move on.’ The Mayor of Greensboro at the time, Keith Holliday, was quoted at a City Council meeting as saying, ‘the families involved are never going to get over it. I wouldn’t get over it. Be that as it may we’ve got to move on. All of us have family tragedies...you’ve got to create your own resolve about the things that happened that

day that were unfair” (Green, 2005b). Unrelenting reflection on past traumas seemed gratuitous, even narcissistic (on narcissism and guilt, see Bruckner, 2010). In a town that prided itself on norms of civility and tolerance, the idea of a truth commission seemed to promise only polarization, disagreement, and distrust (on “civility” in Greensboro, see Chafe, 1980).

Advocates for the Commission, on the other hand, argued that a clear reckoning of the events of November 3rd was essential for the present and future health of the community. They highlighted how the events gave the lie to the city’s progressive self-image; they pointed to resurgent Klan activity as a sign that the past was far from finished. More importantly, they argued that the undeniable distrust between black and white communities in present-day Greensboro was partly an echo from the events of 1979 and their immediate aftermath. Only a thorough remembrance of the causes and consequences of those events would allow citizens the opportunity to acknowledge and work through the deeper traumas surrounding race in Greensboro. Until then the event would be seen in isolation from the context that made it possible. While the City Council feared an extremism lurking behind these claims, proponents of the Commission found official silence to be a more dangerous—if not extreme—position.

Even the process of *creating* the Commission in Greensboro, then, revealed tensions and conflicts within the community. For instance, advocacy for and resistance to the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission tracked nearly perfectly along racial lines. This is not altogether unsurprising, given both the immediate and more-distant history of racial disparities and difference in the South. As labor activist Si Kahn testified to the GTRC, “scratch the surface of any issue in the South and you will find race” (Quoted in Brown, et. al, 2006).

Greensboro has a prominent place in the history of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century struggle for civil rights since it was famously the site of the first widely publicized Woolworth’s sit-in in February 1960. White progressives in the South often saw the city as a model for moderate race-relations; yet the

image of the city as a vanguard of progressivism is misleading at best and ideological at worst. While it is true, for instance, that Greensboro was the first city to announce that it would comply with the Supreme Court's desegregation order in *Brown v. Board of Education*, it was also one of the last cities in the South to act in accordance with federal desegregation orders (Chafe, 1980). What historian William Chafe has described as the "progressive mystique" surrounding Greensboro served to obscure a violent social reality not all that different from other cities throughout the former states of the Confederacy. These comforting illusions surrounding norms of "civility" and moderation were deeply held by many citizens of Greensboro, and they resurfaced during debates about the organizing efforts behind the GTRC. The emphasis on "civil" speech often enforced silence over uncivil or traumatic realities, and the events of November 3, 1979 were no exception. As Allen Johnson, the editorial editor of Greensboro's most widely circulated newspaper, put it, "Greensboro has trouble talking about things; Greensboro likes to talk about good stuff...Greensboro does not like to talk about bad stuff" (Quoted in Zucker, 2007). As the process of creating the GTRC crystallized, so too did these conflicts. The city council, for instance, voted *along racial lines* against official involvement. The process, in these regards at least, "represented the polis to itself," complete with its most significant fractures and lines of division.

The GTRC created a public space for a more capacious—and less romanticized—version of the city's history. For instance the Woolworth's sit-in and similar, early Civil Rights-era activities had become definitional for Greensboro, whereas the events of November 3<sup>rd</sup> were seen as aberrations to be downplayed or forgotten. The Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission was explicitly motivated by the task of "lift[ing] up this painful truth" surrounding November 3<sup>rd</sup> (Brown et al, 2006, 15). By "facing shameful events honestly," the Commission hoped to more fully examine a "difficult chapter of Greensboro's history" (2006, 15). The

Mandate of the GTRC advocated a “humble” and “serious” examination of the past in order to “fully acknowledge” the pain and suffering surrounding the events of 1979 and their aftermath. In this respect, the public nature of the GTRC proceedings—its visible presence in the community for a period of several years, and its afterlife through follow-up public events—was perhaps just as important as the content of its final report. For Rich Rusk, head of the Moore’s Ford Memorial Committee, the GTRC exemplified the possibility that communities can have “a sustained conversation about painful historical topics, like racial violence” (Quoted in Magarrell and Wesley, 2008, 140). By serving as a public object of reflection the GTRC was able to resuscitate a conversation about the events of 1979 and connect it with the interceding years.

The Commission’s final report also highlighted the official and unofficial resistance to the mandate of acknowledgement and reckoning. Many city officials rejected the need for such reflection and clung to the city’s progressive self-understanding. Greensboro citizens were, in their eyes, politically moderate and socially tolerant, and political business was accomplished via well-established norms of civility, courtesy, and a willingness to be persuaded. The violence of such groups as the CWP and the Klan violated these norms, and therefore could not be placed at the core of Greensboro’s public history, confirming Freud’s observation that “society makes what is disagreeable into what is untrue” (1966, 24). As Lisa Magarrell—a consultant to the GTRP from the International Center for Transitional Justice—put it, “in a city renowned for its ‘civility’...dealing with the messiness of truth, emotions, and the failings of the system that tended to serve the majority quite well, was unattractive to government” (Magarrell and Wesley, 2008, 174). Yet the GTRC provided a discursive space outside the official civic discourse that privileged denial. Within this space the living legacies of racial and class violence could be more fully engaged and integrated into revised conceptions of collective history and identity.

Integrative mourning work of this type is performed by describing not only the actual event but also by revealing the broader cultural and political context that made such an event—and its dominant interpretation—possible. By acknowledging these broader social patterns—living legacies of racial discrimination, entrenched patterns of poverty, abuse, and distrust—the GTRC problematized ‘bystander innocence and identified sins of omission as well as commission. Acknowledging this broader context for the event challenged the dominant account that had alienated the source of the trauma from “the community.” This process of alienation resembles a paranoid-schizoid defense of splitting, whereby violence is attributed only to ‘outsiders.’ In Greensboro, this strategy took the form of *othering* not only the Klan members—seen as “relics” of an earlier time—but demonizing the CWP and GAPP as “outside agitators” who had invaded the sleepy mill town only to stir up trouble. The events of November 3rd were framed as a “shootout” between two equally repugnant groups that had “nothing to do with Greensboro” (Magarrell and Wesley, 2008, 30). Mark Sills, one of the GTRC Commissioners, reflected powerfully on the persistence of this myth:

“The city managed through the press to completely distance itself from the event and pretend it never happened, which is why we needed this Commission in the first place...I gave a talk to a church recently about our work and I had people raising their hands and saying, “we thought these were all outsiders and you’re telling us that these folks had been living in this community and working in this community and were a part of this community. We’ve been here all of our lives and no one’s ever told us this before. We thought they were all outsiders”” (quoted in Magarrell and Wesley, 2008, 30).

An institution such as the GTRC goes some distance towards showing the ‘indigenous’ quality of traumatic events—to show, despite their appearance as exogenous shocks, a connection to the mundane habits and patterns of behavior that surround and penetrate the life of the community (on framing see Ignatieff, 1998). The GTRC Executive Summary contained a particularly powerful example of spatial implication with an imaginative transposition of the

events via racial reversal. By reversing the reader's optics, the report is able to reveal a powerful (yet partly unconscious) interpretive framework that helps to explain the disparate racial reaction to the events of November 3, 1979:

Imagine for a moment that these elements [of the event] would have been racially reversed, viewed as a photographic negative. Imagine a group of demonstrators is holding a demonstration against black terrorism in the affluent white community of Irving Park. A caravan of armed black terrorists is allowed to drive unobstructed to the parade starting point, and photos are taken by the police as demonstrators are shot dead. Most of the cars are then allowed to flee the scene, unpursued, even as they threaten neighborhood pedestrians by pointing shotguns through the windows. The defendants are tried and acquitted by an all-black jury. The first shots—fired by the blacks screaming “Shoot the Crackers!” and “Show me a Cracker with guts and I’ll show you a black man with a gun!”—are described by black defense attorneys and accepted by jurors as “calming shots.” Meanwhile, the city government takes steps to block citizen protest of black terrorist violence including a curfew in the white neighborhood (Brown et. al, 2006, 82).

As the report surmises, the events described above are “so unlikely as to be preposterous,” yet “in racial reverse, [they are] exactly what happened” (2006, 32). Sills’ participation on the Commission, in a similar fashion, brought to light for him the unacknowledged privilege associated with fair skin in the south, along with the amnesia that often accompanies such privilege. As he put it, “being in a privileged state, it’s just awfully easy to forget why things are easy or why things seem right when you don’t have to face discrimination” (Quoted in C. Brown, et al, 2006, 31). TRCs, by exploring the historical and social context surrounding the actual trauma, implicate citizen-bystanders in the larger social forces without which the event could not take place. In this respect citizens can learn to become *responsive* to the event even if they were not directly *responsible* for it.

This process—even as it is framed by democratic norms and commitments—remains ambivalent. TRCs at their best offer a common narrative to which citizens can appeal as they address the problems of the contemporary polity, but they cannot preempt such contestation any

more than they can fully resolve the traumas of the past. The relatively modest aims of this public work of mourning offer what could be called a theory of “weak” reconciliation. Weak reconciliation suggests the hope that past wrongs or traumas will be (more) openly and honestly discussed, without the presence of overwhelming bitterness or resentment. But it does not pretend that trauma can be absolutely surmounted or transcended—in this respect it is a “hope against hope,” a commitment to addressing and working through conflicts without completely transcending them. As the GTRC Final Report puts it, the goal is to “take us *some distance* from half-truths, misunderstandings, myth, and hurtful interpretations” (2006, 13). The effect of these conjoined efforts in the case of Greensboro is that the traumatic event has now been situated in a political, social and economic context such that distancing myths and defense mechanisms lose (some of) their power. By “lifting up this painful truth,” the GTRC was, in the words of one participant, “chipping away at a lie”—eroding the common narrative that isolates racial prejudice in historical time, or sees it only as a messy propaedeutic to a now-egalitarian society (Quoted in Magarrell and Wesley, 2008, 28). Lingering prejudice can on this telling only be treated as a fading relic—an archaic mindset on which the sun will eventually set. Yet TRCs, like the tragic notes within the African American mourning tradition, emphasize the contingency of progress in race relations alongside the fractiousness and conflict that remains in the polity.

However, the deep imbrication of the romantic and tragic modes of mourning is also persistent within the literature on and practices of truth commissions. There is a seductive tendency within the TRC model—and the GTRC is no exception—towards a “strong” notion of reconciliation that outstrips the more modest goals of weak reconciliation and insists on a more holistic idea of “healing” or “resolution.” This insistence is premised on a belief in original communal “oneness” that has been violated by the traumatic event(s); only the restoration of this original order will bring about real justice and reconciliation (Norval, 504). Moreover,

reconciliation is read not as a potentially stable (but ultimately precarious) peace but as “closure.” As the GTRC Final Report put it, “reconciliation means to bring together those parts that were torn apart and *make them whole again*, to repair the brokenness in our community.” (Brown et al, 2006, 323),

The language of closure and or redemption presupposes a lost level of communal unity in need of restoration. Often this belief is indebted to explicitly religious or cosmological worldviews, which reduce the TRC process to a moment within a progressive and teleological vision of history. Desmond Tutu articulated such an understanding when he told the South African Commissioners that they “were part of the cosmic movement towards unity, towards reconciliation, that has existed from the beginning of time” (Quoted in Ramsbotham et al, 2005, 230). On another occasion, Tutu referred to the South African nation as a “wounded people...in need of healing” (Hamber and Wilson, 2002, 1). And Tutu went further in a letter addressed to the GTRC, where he lauded the efforts of the Commission and offered encouragement with a verse from the Gospel of John: “the truth will set you free” (Maggarell and Wesley, 2008, 54). As Tutu wrote, “I firmly believe that this is not only true for victims and their families, but for perpetrators and their apologists as well” (2008, 54). This language—of freedom, closure, and redemption—is often found within Commission mandates and within the reflections of Commissioners and participants. If the theological presumptions of such claims are not explicit, then a secularized version of natality (Arendt, 1998)—the belief that humans may “begin again” or start over—is often offered (Brown and Poremski, 2005).

The language of “healing” in the context of social traumas seems, as Martha Minow puts it, “absurd” and “even obscene” (2000. 242). The obscenity results from the aestheticization of terror and trauma, which doggedly remains a haunting presence in many victims’ lives. We could, then, resolve the tension this language creates and reinforce the tragic notes of the TRC

mourning process by re-interpreting the desire to “take the broken parts...and make them whole.” Read in a Kleinian light, this could mean something beyond the redemptive process of joining up parts of the polity that were heretofore sundered; it would mean restoring the *wholeness*—the messy and agonistic complexity—of the objects within historical narratives and the notions of collective identity predicated on these accounts. This resonates with Danielle Allen’s (2004) criticism of “oneness” as a metaphor for democratic politics. As Allen puts it, “the effort to make the people ‘one’ cultivates in the citizenry the desire for homogeneity, for that is the aspiration taught to citizens by the meaning of the word ‘one’” (2004, 17). ‘Oneness’ conceals conflict both within the polity (and, I would add, the psyche). Allen’s preferred polis is a conflictual multiplicity governed not by metaphors of oneness or unity but by “wholeness,” which instead of concealing patterns of sacrifice and loss will cultivate an appreciation of ambivalence, conflict, and plurality. A work of mourning oriented by the metaphor of wholeness could, in Allen’s words, “guide us into a conversation about how to develop habits of citizenship that can help a democracy bring trustful coherence out of division without erasing or suppressing difference” (2004, 27).

On this reading, the task of mourning is not to resolve conflict but to mitigate its most violent features and to find better ways to *live with* its tragic remainders (Minow et al, 2003). This idea trades upon the psychological insights of Klein, for whom the healthy integrated individual will mitigate its disintegrative aggressive desires, even as he or she remains tied to them nevertheless. We can—through an iterable labor of reflection—clarify the sources of our desires, locate their effects in our thoughts and habits, and thereby liberate ourselves from unthinking repetition of destructive behavior. Claims of redemption or healing—at either the individual or collective level—seem instead to slide into a romantic and aestheticized version of history and collective identity that reinforces a paranoid-schizoid politics.

However, to read these notes of redemption and healing out of the TRC process entirely would be to commit the same “embellishment” of the object and of the work of mourning for which I have already indicted Stow. Therefore it seems better to emphasize the imbrication of romantic and tragic modes of mourning, in order to account for the various ways of *giving an account* (Butler, 2005). This would emphasize that the democratic value of the TRC process is not limited to its completed account of the past but to the possibility that it inculcates a tragic perspective that keeps the essential ambivalence and complexity of these accounts in public view. Such an emphasis seems to capture best the “truth” about the TRC process—namely that it is not reconciliatory or redemptive in the ways often described. As Muktha Jost, Commissioner on the GTRC put it, “the experience of searching for truth around November 3rd has been a toxic one. To talk about race, class, police, capital and labor all at the same time is not just divisive, but *is a splintering and shattering activity* that can leave you standing on a lonesome precipice for a long time” (quoted in Magarrell and Wesley, 2008, 241). Mourning work is this “toxic” yet patient labor of “chipping away at a lie”—a lie that either convinces us of our innocence or consoles us with fables of frictionless belonging, either in a romanticized past or an idealized future. Mourning is iterable and precarious because we are always susceptible to aestheticized versions of the past that reinforce psychological mechanisms of self-deception. “Reconciliation,” then, becomes, in the words of GTRC Commissioner Cynthia Brown, the (iterable, interminable) process of “putting ourselves in places with people that we have disagreements with” (quoted in Zucker, 2007). Doing so often pulls apart or shatters our certainties and self-perceptions, yet by seeing conflict as chronic we can discover better ways of living with it—ways that mitigate the denial and splitting essential to a politics of demonization and paranoia (Rogin, 1987). This socio-political version of the work of mourning imitates Baldwin’s “good natured

reconciliation” that unfreezes our awareness and presents the vastness of our history *and* our present which is both “more worse and much better” than we had appreciated.

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