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The Visual Image and the Act of Bearing Witness

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The ‘staging of forgiveness’ was the project set by Jacques Derrida in his lecture *Justice, Perjury and Forgiveness III* at The Graduate Faculty at The New School for Social Research. The first word of the lecture was *pardon*, a word that symbolizes the gesture toward forgiveness spoken for the smallest infraction to significant acts of violence. Although he began his project with the question of whether forgiveness could be staged, (“Should we give a theatricality to the phenomenon of the ‘pardon’?”), the metaphor of the stage is a tentative representation of history as a playing out of a political and public history. This is the site for a ‘placing-in-view’ of the phenomenon of “forgiveness,” i.e., where we can see it make ‘an appearance.’ The play of forgiveness on a worldwide scale is exemplified by the case of South Africa after Apartheid. Derrida attempts to demonstrate this as a showing of the globalization of confession, as an example of the possibility of political and social transformation taking place through the phenomenon of forgiveness as the new South Africa reconciles itself with its violent history.

In this paper, I would first like to briefly describe Derrida’s phenomenological description of this staging of forgiveness. Following his connection of forgiveness to the world of affairs, the concern of this paper will be to connect the newly political character of forgiveness to art, specifically the visual image. Although Derrida uses Hegelian dialectic to outline the phenomenal staging of reconciliation, his interest in tracing and deconstructing the language of forgiveness can be attributed to the influence of Emmanuel Levinas’s reading of ethics and phenomenology. In the first part of this paper, following Levinas’s and Derrida’s lead, I want to make a fundamental connection between ethics, the social imagination, and the performance of the pardon. The description of the case
of South Africa as a site of transformation will then be examined in the second part of this paper in order to investigate and make a connection to the role of visual art. The idiomatic character of what Derrida describes as the “wound” will be examined in its connection with visual imagery, using art as a form of testimony for those who must forgive. In conclusion, this connection will be extended to the case of American politics in the final part of this paper, so that we may ask new questions about the wounds of slavery and the presence of racism that haunts our social imagination.

The Phenomenon of Forgiveness

Alex Boraine told me of a black African woman whose husband was abducted and killed... After learning for the first time how her husband had died, she was asked if she could forgive the man who did it. Speaking slowly, in one of the native languages, her message came back through the interpreters: “No government can forgive.” Pause. “No commission can forgive.” Pause. “Only I can forgive.” Pause. “And I am not ready to forgive.”

Derrida opened his speculative play with the voice of Hegel behind the scenes speaking from The Phenomenology of Spirit, “The word of reconciliation is the work of Spirit [Geist] being there [Dasein].” Hegel, as the narrating voice, qualifies the conditions for this staging of reconciliation, “The revealed religion is world reconciliation.” By staging or playing out the phenomenon of forgiveness, Derrida gives a theatricality to the dialogue between victim and the accused, so that reconciliation is a phenomenon in which the world that is presently divided begins a movement toward mediation. It is not yet self-consciousness of Spirit but it implies the presence of Spirit. The active process of reconciliation in South Africa is a political and social re-unification couched in the language of forgiveness. Derrida attributes the possibility of a new South Africa to the ‘mondiale-ization’ of forgiveness or in other words, the globalization of confession. Both the Hegelian notion of Spirit and the Christian notion of confession have already taken their place in
history, without which figures like Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu would not have ‘made their appearance’ on the world stage. The movement towards reconciliation implies first that there has been a wounding. The “wound” [blessure/Bletzen] represents and encompasses all of the multifarious meanings of suffering, trauma and division. Derrida describes this ‘condition’ for reconciliation as idiomatic, “It is not on the stage of History, it is murmuring in the wings...practicing its role...waiting for its scene.” The idiom demonstrates the ineffability of suffering. A violence inflicted by one to another cannot be recognized or made apparent until ‘after the fact,’ made known only by way of memory and reproduction. It is idiomatic insofar as the wounding is always described in the past-tense, a distinguishing of the victim in the violence, leaving a scar that both opposes and binds the offended to their offender. There is no analogy for experience of suffering insofar as it only appears in the “pure singularity of the victim.” The idiom manifests as resistance and difference in the organization of the Spirit.

Boraine’s description of the woman whose husband was killed (cited at the top of this section) is not merely anecdotal, but rather shows the conflict in the recognition of the imperative to forgive, coupled with the incredible difficulty and resistance to forgive. There is no literal translation for her contradictory statement. Her position can only shed light onto the irreducibility and incommunicability of the suffering of the victim as well as the inherent impossibility of forgiveness. If forgiveness is possible, then it stands outside of the political, public institutions and forms of recognition. Derrida calls this the “screen” of the idiom that filters and distorts while multiplying in response to the asking of forgiveness because “everyone has his [or her] method.” Derrida picks out several ways in which forgiveness is shown to be an ethical phenomenon and not simply an exercise of political unification, in effect demonstrating that he finds the process of reconciliation not to be completely quantifiable by Hegelian dialectic.

Derrida focuses on the extreme and extraordinary change that forgiveness seems to provide, borrowing Benjamin’s messianic description of forgiveness as a “cleansing storm.” Benjamin briefly and enigmatically describes the logic of retribution as distinct from the logic of last judgment. The difference is signified by an
"expectation of punishment" given to retribution as opposed to the unexpected, unpredictable "purifying hurricane" brought with the arrival of the last judgment. While the economy of retribution can address the deeds of only one life or one generation, the economy of the moral universe is "beyond all remembering or forgetting." Forgiveness is possible because of the moral universe and in this context remains as an excess beyond retribution, i.e., beyond that which is available via political institution.

[Where] divine power enters into the secular world, it breathes destruction. That is why in this world nothing constant and no organization can be based on divine power, let alone domination as its supreme principle...where it retreats, we find the zone of politics, of the profane, of a bodily realm...without law in a religious sense.... The divine manifests itself in them only as a revolutionary force.

This condition of forgiveness beyond retribution according to Derrida is illustrated insofar as the name of God is invoked at the beginning of the new South African constitution. It is a form of recognition of both the impossibility and the imperative to forgive. The conjunction of offended with the offender is now only possible by calling upon the name of God. "We the people of South Africa recognize the injustice of our past, honor those who have suffered... respect those who built...united in our diversity...adopt the constitution as the supreme law to heal divisions of the past...may God protect our people."

The injured and their injury may begin to be recognized politically only alongside the question of responsibility. In the case of South Africa, the path to justice was not merely in terms of punishment and compensation, and it was not born by way of violent overturning in revolution. The questions of "Who?" and "How?" could be asked publicly without being necessarily for the sake of retribution, presenting the possibility of forgiveness in an attempt to form genuine national solidarity.

Desmond Tutu's Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC] was designed with the assumption that this is a moral universe, "The premise underlying the commission is that it is possible for
people to change, insofar as perpetrators can come to realise the evil of their acts and even be able to plead for the forgiveness of those they have wronged." The Christian notion of confession makes the process of forgiveness a reciprocal relation insofar as there is a "performative commitment." The speaking-out, or as Derrida calls it, "the out-saying," about the wounding in the past, and within a set allotment of time, taken to identify the oppressors and the oppressed contributes to a revision of collective memory and history. This is also why the specifically European, Christian idea of confession, as it has become a recognized and meaningful idea globally, has allowed for the discourse of forgiveness to enter upon the stage of history in a political form. For Christianity, one may confess the past and presently seek forgiveness, so that there is real possibility of forgiveness as a form of unification presented by the performance of confession. Yet Derrida is hesitant to suggest that the offer of confession leads pragmatically to forgiveness and unification, "To confess in language is to erase the confession." It is not the content of what is said, but the gesture of confession that announces the advent of what could be possible only by the saying.

"Being itself is alone in its absolute resistance to every metaphor." In the case of forgiveness, there is nothing within the mechanisms of power that will make forgiveness a possibility. The economy of power is unified by an identity in representation, a network of given assignments and appropriations. The obligation and the importance to forgive exists, but this alone cannot necessitate and motivate forgiveness. The monolithic hardness of the heart that has been wounded softens and "departs from itself" in forgiveness. That there is a process of healing and an attempt at reconciliation through forgiveness in South Africa is evidenced by the call for "a new language" and "a softer approach" in the effort to reestablish post-Apartheid institutions.

Derrida, by describing the phenomenon of forgiveness, makes thematic a power of transformation that stands outside of the economy of powerful institutions. This demonstrates a reading for ethical phenomena connected to the Levinasian call to renounce what is "always self-same" and a recognition of the violence exercised by monolithic unities. For Levinas, there is an asymmetrical relationship between the self and the other, always accompanied
by the call for responsibility and respect for the otherness of the Other. This debt of oneself to the Other manifests as an ethical imperative and requires an awareness to not reduce otherness to the economy of the self. The responsibility to difference itself through the constant vigilance for double-meanings is the way in which Derrida manifests a resistance to the desire for a monolithic unity that manifests throughout the history of Hellenistic tradition. He remains critical of the extent to which we could ethically subject this process of wounding and forgiveness to a more simplistic playing out between consciousness and unconsciousness.

There are two conditions for forgiveness: the good will of the offended party and the full awareness of the offender. But the offender is in essence unaware. The aggressiveness of the offender is perhaps his very unconsciousness. Aggression is the lack of attention par excellence. In essence, forgiveness would be impossible ... [But] One can, if pressed to the limit, forgive the one who has spoken unconsciously. But it is very difficult to forgive.

Derrida challenges Levinas’s radical asymmetry of the Other in other texts by demonstrating that there is always an attempt to reduce “the debt” one has to the other; there is always a naming, “restitution” and an appropriation of the other. Yet, Derrida recognizes the always-present possibility of violence. Derrida’s work, as presented here and in his lecture, indicates in both his method of the trace and in his theme of forgiveness, an important active imperative to unwind cyclic, self-serving economies. While Levinas can only remind us of the difficulty and the resistance to appropriate, for Derrida, the gesture of the pardon is the sign, “the advent” of the possibility that had been impossible. The initiation of reconciliation begins with the confession, a non-economic act of abandoning the self for the sake of another, to give up oneself by speaking and becoming other than oneself. For Derrida, even the declaration of war is already a desire for reconciliation through confession, insofar as it is an address to what is radically Other, despite itself.

So what does justice mean in the “wake of mass violence”? The question of forgiveness resounds when it comes to the
insurmountable wound of institutionalized mass violence. There are some similarities in the histories of the Holocaust and Apartheid, insofar as they were racial forms of systematic violence and oppression, but also that in both cases there manifested a political and intellectual desire to seek alternative forms of accusation and retribution. The transformative power of forgiveness can be read in Mandela's unusual goal regarding South Africa: "to liberate the oppressed and the oppressor both" since, "Freedom is meaningless if it is not raised above opposition." The healing process is to create an "immunization against the scar" and to remove power from the wounds of past violence.

APARTHEID: by itself the word occupies the terrain like a concentration camp.... At every point, like all racisms, it tends to pass off segregation as natural... racism always betrays the perversion of man.... It institutes, declares, inscribes, prescribes. A system of marks, it outlines space in order to assign forced residence or to close off borders. It does not discern, it discriminates.

Reconciliation through forgiveness, as a meaningful phenomenon, goes beyond mere retribution, beyond a mere speech act, words of apology or simple public demonstration. The gesture of the pardon is a gift without return. There is a genuine risk that the public appropriation of reconciliation through confession and forgiveness will fail. The case of South Africa is a model of this attempt, "the TRC is...unique...the TRC does not seek criminal prosecutions for perpetrators: instead it is committed to amnesty for the sake of national reconciliation...the TRC is essentially a public and democratic enterprise." Perhaps included in the exhibition of the pardon is the willingness to let the transformation take effect, to welcome the radical change that forgiveness would require by providing a ritual. This public willingness can neither guarantee nor force forgiveness. The political employment of asking forgiveness gives a face to the violence.

It happens as though the multiplicity of persons...were the condition for the fullness of 'absolute truth' as though each person, through his uniqueness, ensured
a revelation of a unique aspect of the truth, and that certain sides of it would never reveal themselves if certain people were missing from mankind.\textsuperscript{29}

So, if forgiveness requires memory of the wound, how important is the reproduction of the wound in memory as images? In the social imagination? And if this wound conditions a people, as something that both defines them and opposes them to others who have wounded them, how can retaining a memory and awareness of the violence be in service of the social imagination? How can images of the wounding become a catalyst for the possibility of forgiveness?

The Visual Image as the Act of Bearing Witness

\textit{[From] out of the painting’s exile, in its dead silence, one hears the cry of moaning or accusation. ... the paintings gaze and call out in silence. And their silence is just. A discourse would once again compel us to reckon with the present state of force and law. It would draw up contracts, dialecticize itself, let itself be reappropriated again. This silence calls out unconditionally; it keeps watch on that which is not, on that which is not yet, and on the chance of still remembering some faithful day.}\textsuperscript{30}

In order to open up the possibility of the impossibility of forgiveness and bring it into political discourse, the process of healing requires a public forum. Revelation and testimony to the wounding allows for the scar to mark its place in a common history, effecting a collective subjectivity. History is “self-made, producing and performing itself.”\textsuperscript{31} South Africa after Apartheid represents a case of the political imperative to confess, but in its exercise is also the effort to institute the ethical imperative that the wounds of the victims cannot be forgotten.\textsuperscript{32} The public acknowledgement of institutional injury, although generated paradoxically as a form of political imposition itself, can also allow for the identification of both the wounded and those who participated in the inflicting of
the wound. But, as shown in the case of South Africa, this process of identifying what had passed and making known what “cannot be repeated,” was not an exercise in order to retaliate and destroy the other, but rather it was an effort to free both the offended and offenders in reconciliation, to break the oppressive bonds of the master/slave relationship. Because there is a genuine difficulty in the political imposition of confession, we are lead to the question of testimony. Because there is no testimony that could represent “absolute victimization,” presenting the wounding becomes a resurrection, “a ghost story.”

Part of the reason for the contradictory imperative and impossibility of forgiveness is in the fact that it attempts to open itself to an unspoken past. Apartheid was a symbol of “European 'creation',” a symbol of partition and separation, and healing this wound of institutionalized racism would require a rewriting of not just its political but also its economic meaning and power. Suffering had been justified and executed by using the word, and it may not necessarily be redeemed by the word. “APARTHEID – may that remain the name from now own, the unique appellation for the ultimate racism in the world, the last of many. May it thus remain, but may a day come when it will only be for the memory of man.”

The tribunal (“being before the court”) represented by the TRC was a place for testimony in South Africa and was not without criticism for those who expected something more expedient. The transformation of forgiveness cannot come from merely speaking of the past in an exchange of words. Because the wounding of the past injury has no direct translation, the victim cannot be simply be “present and accounted for;” rather, this kind of representation requires an extraordinary interest for making the impossible possible.

“[The] community is not yet perfected in this its self-consciousness; in general, its content exists for it in the form of picture-thinking.” The public value placed on exhibition of the victim gives an opportunity to regard the wounds of the past, justified in part by a genuine interest for reconciliation. The spirit of the community has not yet come together, but through testimony, a community can begin to picture, to imagine the way in which it had violently formed an alienation with itself, “It own reconciliation therefore enters its consciousness as something distant, as something
in the distant future, just as the reconciliation which the other Self achieved appears as something in the distant past.” If we allow ourselves to continue to borrow from Hegelian language, we can treat this public function of imagery as a sort of consciousness-raising of institutional violence. Perhaps here in the context of forgiveness, we can consider a public, political function of imagery that does not have to be labeled as mere propaganda, but that it is still a form of “nation-building.”

In this way, because it is essentially the untranslatable, the images of the wound may only communicate sincerity by being poetically formed. They must include the imagination and creative spontaneity of the artist to recreate an image that cannot simply be remembered. Ordinary speech that functions in terms of utility in some ways facilitates the process of healing, but then there is always also the question of sincerity. Simplification in the reproduction of the wound, a minimizing of past violence into a clear (im)position, creates insincerity within the process of reconciliation. The performance of the gesture of pardon that opens up a possibility of forgiveness is a promise with the risk that it may go without restitution. Although picture-thinking is a lower form of consciousness for Hegel, the idiom made present in painting is an “untranslatable itself,” a signature to be traced. In this context, the public presentation of visual images can be offered in sincerity, a sort of public offer that implies, “we are remembering” in consideration of the debt owed to the victims.

If reproduction of the wound is impossible yet possible, then shouldn’t it require a creative imagination to bring it into view? It cannot be reproducible by accumulating the ‘facts’ of the matter, categorizing the injuries or measuring quantities according to some standard, because then the public display of the wound would be treated as a matter of retaliation toward those who have wounded, reducing the effort back to political economy. If there is to be a possibility of healing, we have to re-member what has been done without perpetuating violence. Distributive justice is economic rectification, in an attitude of accounts made (testimony) and accounts paid (compensation), and this form of resolution would and should not apply here. It is poiesis that makes the impossible possible. There is something about the idiom that, especially since
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it is non-reproducible, the aesthetic recreation of the wound allows for the gravity of the testimony. "Images ceaselessly undermine their own mesmerizing power generating a movement of transcendence towards the other. They become genuine speech...and [open] us to a relation with someone." To create an image of the wound would be to re-member and relocate what past violence has dismembered and dislocated. The activity of piecing together what had already been torn apart requires imagination outside of economy.

"The artwork...makes public something other than itself; it manifests something other; it is an allegory." Although visual images, i.e., portrayals of the wound, would be not factual, but rather "performative fictions," the untranslatable victimization of mass violence, in this way, needs translation. The ethical imperative to recognize violence can be realized through the ritual of the pardon elicited by testimony. As the wounds come from an institution, the imperative also means that this testimony should find admittance in a public place and return to the institution,

In this collective and international exhibition [Art contre/against Apartheid]...pictural, sculptural idioms will be crossing, but they will be attempting to speak the other’s language without renouncing their own. And in order to effect this translation, their common reference henceforth makes an appeal to a language that cannot be found, a language at once very old, older than Europe, but for that very reason to be invented once more.

Imagination has its public role and artwork can derive a value through this ethical desire for giving voice to the unsaid, unspoken injuries of mass violence. Benjamin describes the cult value of art, "The uniqueness of a work...imbedded in the fabric of a tradition...found its expression in the cult. We know that the earliest art works originated in service of a ritual." The play of the pardon cannot be between individuals in a case like institutionalized racism, especially since the victimization and the history of injury proves impossible to trace. Cultivating the public effort to recognize the wounds of racism should not be diminished by this impossibility, and perhaps the political motivations can always remain in question. The pardon
should have its ritual, its silence, its dignity by not subjecting the victimization to a mere exposition of testimony, an exposure to more violence in (what could be a gruesome) public display. There is a buffer in the creation of visual images, allowing for the testimony to resonate through works of art, to be mythologized in an exhibit of the imagination.

The role of the imagination in political affairs raises the question of historical revisionism, a concern that accompanied the TRC. Not only was there the question of “slippery and subjective character of truth claims” but also a question of the validity of a commission symbolically designed for forgiveness and reconciliation. The promises of the TRC in its design could not be politically effective, but it is the interest and the regard for testimony that distinguishes it from simply providing an immediate, practical purpose of punishment and compensation. By calling upon forgiveness as a way to reconcile, there is an effort to keep responsibility in mind, to “think of the repair, no doubt to dress the wounds [panser], to bandage…” but there is a caution in turning it into a commercial affair, into “a pair[ing that] functions/walks [marche] with symmetrical, harmonious, complementary, dialectical oppositions, with a regulated play of identities and differences.”

The ethical imperative to forgive cannot be diminished by the goals of restitution, the effort to repair what should have not been paired. The cautioning and the questioning remains with this attempt to provide testimony, since it is impossible to remember the bond of the victim to the institution and not reproduce another possibility of violence.

This political purpose of imagery generated out of an ethical imperative, to imagine what has passed for the sake of forgiveness, may be a departure from Derrida’s wish for art with no truth. VanGogh rendered his shoes, he rendered himself in the shoes, he surrendered with his shoes, he went in his shoes, he went back to his shoes, he surrendered to his shoes, he gave himself back his shoes, he paid his shoes back to himself. All meanings knot and unknot themselves in the lace/snare of this syntax.

This narration of rendre has a wandering quality, generating meanings without purpose. This is the character of art that
Derrida borrows from Kant, so that with art there is a “groundless legitimation.” The purposelessness rendered in the work of art is its purpose, but unlike Kant, the sublimity of artwork is in that it is an interruption of meaning. The “legitimation” of art as a form of imaginative testimony to the past that cannot otherwise be reproduced as described here, is not for the sake of mere interruption, but it does disturb and awaken the presence of a wound. In support of this, maintaining the primary interest in ethics, Levinas’s possible reading of the visual image would be one that does not interrupt, but rather it performs as witness testimony. The responsibility that one has to the other perhaps can then permit this use of the visual image to present the voices and faces of the past. Richard Kearney discusses this application of art to Levinas’s call to recognize the face of the other,

The choice of response to such [an]...image is ours, but it is always an ethical choice. And it cannot in fact be otherwise, for it is a response, one way or the other to the ethical cry of another.... Before we are condemned to be free, we are condemned to be responsible.

With this there is also a caution, one that should not limit art to only a testimony of the past. It would reduce the capacity to imagine into a “cheerless moralism,” as only a conception of mourning (a memorial to the dead).

Derrida’s present reflections on forgiveness echo this ethical imperative, which is not apparent in his earlier efforts to deconstruct the “truth” in painting.

Beyond...the dialectic of strategic or economic calculations, beyond state-controlled, national or international tribunals, beyond the juridico-political or theologico-political discourse...it is necessary to appeal unconditionally to the future of another law and another force lying beyond the totality of this present.

There must be finite conditions set upon this infinite obligation to recognize systematic violence. The offer of the pardon can be
made possible by setting apart a place and a time, a public space specifically allotted to remember so that we have pause to look at the margins, to hear the voices and to see the faces of the victims of racism.

Concluding Remarks

...America’s historical amnesia about black humiliation and black suffering is seen as a basic prerequisite for a better American future of racial harmony. Yet history – the past as history and the present as history – will not let us off so easily.... No civilization fails to reap what it sows. No nation escapes the poison of its ignoble paradox.58

Apartheid has become a word, or as Derrida describes it, a “watchword,” that represents the last of the justified forms of politically instituted racial oppression. The propensity for ‘amnesia’ in American culture has only prevented the wounds of oppression from being healed. There has never been a public demonstration or a public stage where the possibility for forgiveness could take place, where there would be a real attempt as a nation to speak about what has gone “unsaid.” “Apartheid is and would be an American problem.”59 Historically, Americans have fought for and earned racial equality through civil rights, but has the culture really healed from the wounds of slavery? My sense is that it has not, insofar as the images of racism and the legacy of slavery still today evoke fear, anger, and power. It is no surprise in this context that the political and social “band-aids” of affirmative action and political correctness have translated in our culture as a kind of insincere gesture. When juxtaposed to the idea of forgiveness—as a transformative phenomenon and as an attempt at genuine, public dialogue—the American response to the institutional violence of racism fundamentally proves itself to be a poor remedy.

While Western theological discourse bound the people under Apartheid to a hidden political reality, Derrida uses the example of Picasso’s Guernica to represent how the power of a visual image, an aesthetic creation, can “break the prison-house of language...[an
image that] neither commemorates nor represents an event." But today it is not the violence of war and the recognition of its victims that needs new imagination, but rather it is in the banality of racism. The recognition of systematic oppression by political institutions (materially and ideologically) as a form of violence both for the Western world and globally is possible because there has been the Holocaust. There has developed a valid ethical imperative to think about the violence and aggression of totalitarianism, or as Derrida calls it, "monolithic thinking" wherever it exists.

I've presented in cooperation with Derrida’s thematization of forgiveness and example of South Africa, an idea of art that can provides testimony as well as the ethical possibilities of this sort of aesthetic representation. There is evidence of further possibility of this transformative power insofar as there are images which serve this function of testimony that surface and give presence to the scars of racism in American history. Because there are no facts or mere statements of apology that can restore justice, this idea of testimony, can give a dignity to the victims in relation to the offense of racism, give them a face and a place of recognition.

"The Means to an End... A Shadow Drama in 5 Acts" by Kara Walker, 1995. Etching, 35"x 24". Courtesy the artist and Brent Sikkema Gallery.

The American legacy of slavery and segregation has little mythology. There are no images that can publicly testify to the injury of institutional oppression. There are rare cases of images generated for that purpose but they are not "national" so they are not really "public." The work of Kara Walker shows the attempt to eulogize this past injury with a 'play' of disturbing silhouettes, also illustrated in The Means to an End... A Shadow Drama in 5 Acts (shown above). "Walker’s work assumes a complex whole...she
knows that through humor we digest the indigestible, through myths and games we both reinforce and subvert accepted realities.... Our banished stereotypes have not disappeared: they have only hidden. Here, they are released to write their own stories.”64 The relatively private exhibition and regard of these works in museums and galleries do not have the reverence that public, institutionally recognized work has in our culture. Upon seeing Walker’s work, we are reminded that our present discourses about race are essentially inappropriate.

Compare this to other forms of visual imagery generated as a form of healing. The Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C., designed by Maya Lin, is a nationally recognized site of naming and recognition. The descending wall testifies to the injuries to the American psyche inflicted by the Vietnam War. Although criticized for being untraditional, it evokes a new image in the ritual of the war memorial and provides a testimony to the past. This monument is not a solution to the problem of nationalism that was associated with the American occupation of Vietnam, but it is a significant alternative to a political game of blame and accountability. There is a public place of recognition of the scar inflicted by the institution of government upon its own citizens.

I felt that as a culture we were extremely youth-oriented and not willing or able to accept death or dying as a part of life. The rites of mourning, which in more primitive and older cultures were very much a part of life, have been suppressed in our modern times. In the design of the memorial, a fundamental goal was to be honest about death, since we must accept that loss in order to begin to overcome it. The pain of the loss will always be there, it will always hurt, but we must acknowledge the death in order to move on.65

I am not suggesting here that we merely raise a statue to slavery, nor do I want to simply promote another form of nationalist propaganda. Nevertheless, I want to acknowledge that there are signs that we still have not transcended the cyclic patterns of racist discourse. That we still need a way to reflect as a society upon the...
past of racism is indicated by the fact that there is still an ongoing debate about reparations for slavery, including the response to the recent attempt at a government apology that is simply too late; it is an offer without content.66

This is a question for the political institution: how much do we allow ourselves to see and how much have we selectively forgotten? In effect, we perpetuate the oppression by not recognizing it as such, especially if we consider that “Aggression is the lack of attention par excellence.”67 How can a public testimony and public witnessing assist in what is regarded as important, not just politically but ethically? Although freedom and equality have been granted, the responsibility has been without account, without regard.68 The suggestion that we recognize the gravity of the past comes from the remarkable fact that there is so little regard for genuine dialogue about the victims and executioners. Today, there is no one to ‘blame’ because no one has taken responsibility. The violence of the past continues and is regenerated through our ignorance, our lack of interest and recognition of past forms of systematic violence.

The process of thinking about the world by excising double meanings requires a dismemberment of political phenomena. Looking to remember, to bring back an awareness to past violence through an imaginative play that is interested also does not need to be self-serving. “To rescue means to love things.”69 The interest and the investment in reexamining past racisms and institutional oppressions is not only politically motivated (as a form of “nation-building” as I described earlier) but also ethically motivated.70 Here, I have borrowed the Hegelian and Derridian structures of description as applied to the case of South Africa to make a suggestion, a prescription about American racism as well. I hope to present a reminder of an obligation to the unrepresented, the unspoken, non-public legacy of slavery. There are options to the amnesia that Cornel West describes above, options to the selective memory of American culture that can provide more sincere reparations rather than continuing with the treatment that we have given it so far. To take the question of forgiveness more seriously would also mean a public willingness to take responsibility for the violence exercised by institutional racisms.71
Notes
1 From the third installment of a seminar given by Prof. Derrida offered at The Graduate Faculty, New School University, Fall 1999. All quotations from Derrida will be from this lecture unless otherwise cited. Quotes from this lecture are approximate.
4 Hegel, Phenomenology, p. 478.
5 Derrida discusses the significance of the wound as both a blessure in the French (to tear apart) and as a Bletzen in the old German (to piece together). He finds that the wound indicates a double meaning of separation and reparation in which the one implicates the other, “what tears to pieces and pieces back together,” Derrida in lecture, 1999.
6 Ibid.
7 Reconciliation is possible through traditional political forms of retribution, compensation, and punishment. It is forgiveness as a form of reconciliation that brings an impossibility insofar as there is no reason or justification that can make forgiveness possible. The political impossibility of forgiveness is recognized in part by the fact that it usually requires or includes a theological or religious context.
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12 Archbishop Desmond Tutu from “It is the Deed that is Evil, not the Doer” from the Cape Times, April 17, 1995.

13 This is somewhat opposed to repentance in the Hebraic tradition, insofar as only the future can truly hold the promise of forgiveness, something not granted in the present, “the most specific meaning in the Jewish idea of forgiveness is in the beginning (starting anew) and in messianic certainty” (Derrida in lecture paraphrasing Leo Baeck’s The Essence of Judaism, 1999).

14 “Deconstructive readings enact a powerful logic; a logic which because not general, not a universal, subsists only in and through the enactment. Thus, Derrida’s infinite task: the otherness of the other, its particularity, its unique probity, is a product of reading, of demonstrating in each case where totality or universality loom...” J.M. Bernstein, The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), p. 157.


17 Martin Srajek attributes this to the influence of Judaism on each of their positions as philosophers. “Levinas remains in the background of Derrida’s writing... Levinas’ thought is from the very outset understood as one aspect of the Jewish matrix to which and out of which Derrida responds” (Srajek, p.142).

18 Srajek, p.264. The dichotomy between “Hebraism” and “Hellenism” established by Levinas is adopted by Derrida. “Are we Greeks or Are we Jews? Philosophers or prophets?” See Levinas’s Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 24. Also see epigram of Derrida’s “Violence and Metaphysics” from Writing and Difference, p. 79. Derrida had also mentioned this dichotomy regarding theatre in his lecture, “the tragedy of the Jewish people in comparison to Greek tragedy. They cannot inspire fear or compassion or pity. In the Greek tragedies, terror and pity were aroused by the acting of a fatal mistake regarding something that would have beautiful...that there was something necessary, of
fate.... Not so with Jewish tragedy. There is only horror, repulsion with no identification of [an] object to fear.


20 For a more detailed discussion of this, see Srajek, pp. 144-145.

21 “Language is the *Dasein* of the Spirit.... Language *par excellence* should be reconciliation.” Derrida in lecture, 1999.

22 Borrowed from the title of Alexander Boraine’s “Justice in Cataclysm: Criminal Tribunals in the Wake of Mass Violence,” July 20-21, 1996. Boraine is the Vice Chairperson of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and in this text discusses the “alternatives and adjuncts to criminal prosecutions.”

23 Derrida made available to the students of the lecture articles that discussed the connection of Apartheid to the Holocaust. See the criticism of this connection between the Holocaust and Apartheid in “Africa’s Nazis: Apartheid as Holocaust?” by Heribert Adam, *Political Monitor*, vol. 14, No. 1, Summer 1997. He argues that although Apartheid was not genocide, it was a form of institutional oppression.

24 Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*. Derrida also describes Mandela’s unique character, “incarcerated 27 years without resentment, without revenge.” This forgiving sentiment also resonates with the creation of studio space and the exhibiting of art in South Africa, “When we moved in we said we were not going to perpetuate discrimination. That we were going to open the facility to whites ... The only condition we imposed was that more artists in these studios be black than white.” Woods quoting David Koloane, South African painter, curator and founder of the Bag Factory, a studio established primarily for black artists (Woods, pp. 36-37).

25 Derrida in lecture, 1999. Derrida recognizes that there is a paradox of endless liberation, that one could be liberated from the past by going back to the beginning. The language of guilt is generated from this paradox.


Here I am thinking of Benjamin’s dichotomy between the ritual and exhibition values of art as well. See “The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproduction,” *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), as discussed in the second part of this paper.


33 Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 257. Here he is discussing VanGogh’s painting, the same painting of unlaced shoes discussed by Heidegger in “The Origin of the Work of Art.” He makes reference to this idea earlier in the text as well, “And what happens with...shoelaces when they are more or less undone? What takes place when they are unlaced in the painting? One looks for the revenue (return on the investment) or the ghost [revenant], that which has just come back [vient de revenir], in these steps without steps ... Thus the question of the interlace [l’entrelacs] and disparate resounds ... What is a desire of restitution if it pertains to [a trait à] the truth in painting?” (Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, p. 10).


35 Ibid, p. 291. This was written by Derrida before the abolition of Apartheid. Derrida defends this statement in “But, beyond...” two writers who misinterpret his appeal for Apartheid to remain in memory as the last symbol of racism.


37 There is an interesting criticism of this raised in regard to the focus of the TRC on “extraordinary violations” and missing the more banal forms of institutional and bureaucratic violence. “This focus ... has also allowed whites to convince themselves that apartheid is dead and buried; this obscures the continuities of racialised poverty produced through decades of apartheid’s social engineering” (Steven Robins, “Flawed but potent version of the Truth,” *Mail and Guardian*, June-July 1998, p. 26).
See Woods, "South Africa," p. 35. This was Benjamin’s concern in "The Work of Art." The ritual value of a work of art is lost to an exhibition value which no longer is art with authenticity. The main concern for Benjamin is the political motives of art that has lost its authenticity, which becomes a form of political manipulation and propaganda.


From Translator’s Preface in *The Truth in Painting*, p. xiv.

An “ethical poetics is one which responds to the face with the question, ‘Who?’ ... a poetics of responsibility...ethical language with bears witness to the infinity of the other. And it is this infinity which testifies to ‘my responsibility...’,” Richard Kearney, “The Crisis of the Image: Levinas’ Ethical Response” from *The Ethics of Postmodernity: Current Trends in Continental Thought*. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999), p. 15.

Kearney, p. 20.


Heidegger, “Origin of the Work of Art,” p. 145. This idea of art as allegory to destiny and history is refuted by Derrida in *The Truth in Painting*. Also see for commentary, Bernstein, pp. 148-155.

Derrida, *Truth in Painting*, p. 3.


Many “South Africans are profoundly skeptical of the theological language of forgiveness and reconciliation espoused by commission chair Desmond Tutu and his deputy, Alec Borraine [sic.].” Robins, p. 26.

The TRC “has established a new historical benchmark in terms of public knowledge: in whatever way they may be interpreted or explained, the sheer number and gravity of political atrocities in our recent past can no longer be doubted or ignored.” DuToit, p. 9.


There is an interesting article by Carol Smart about the testimony of rape victims and the doubling of the violence with the imposition of testimony where the victim has to recount the rape in the courtroom, “Rape and the Disqualification of Gender.” Derrida also
Kinesis discussed the problem of rape and gender for the TRC in his lecture, 1999.

Bernstein commenting on Derrida’s *Truth in Painting*, pp. 155-56.


J.M. Bernstein explaining Derrida, pp. 151, 140.

Kearney, p. 22.

“One still reserves the right of art as art to suspend judgment, however provisionally, while it explores and experiments in a free play of imagination. Levinas did not fully appreciate that if the ultimate origin and end of art is ethics, the rest belongs to poetics,” Kearney, p. 22.


I couldn’t help thinking that Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* would be a form of this rare mythology. I also think it’s interesting that the main theme of the novel is a haunting of a family by a dead child, following the idea from Derrida that this kind of artwork provides a kind of ‘ghost story.’ See my footnote 33, p. 22.

It is interesting to note that after Apartheid, there was an emergence of public exhibitions of murals, a form of art often used for political discourse. See Woods, pp. 34-38, including an article by Nancy Spector on the First Johannesburg Biennale after Apartheid in 1995. An exploration on this subject of mural-making as political discourse and public witness would require another paper. An example of this is available in Joyce Gregory Wyels’ article, “Great Walls, Vibrant Voices” in *Americas* where she states, “Throughout diverse neighborhoods of Los Angeles, public spaces are canvases for bold murals reflecting ethnic pride and cultural identity,” February 2000.

Maya Lin, "Making the Memorial" in New York Review of Books, November 2, 2000. I want to thank Prof. Lawrence Waldron from the Fine Arts department at St. John's University for suggesting Maya Lin's work as an example of forgiveness and healing through art.

"A bill of apology wouldn't heal.... It would only divide. However it does put on the table a critical issue that underlies much of the nation's current racial tensions: Do whites 'owe' blacks for past injustices? To many people that debt is the rationale for affirmative action, as well as for the double standard that allows Louis Farrakhan to go uncensored for saying the kinds of things that David Duke cannot" (From Howard Gleckman's, "An Apology for Slavery? It's 140 Years Too Late," Business Week Online, June 23, 1997).

Quoting again from Levinas, see my note. 19, p. 19.

Freedom from slavery and racial equality were granted in amendments to the Constitution. Yet, as it has already been stated earlier in this paper, responsibility comes before freedom. See quote from Kearney, my note 55, p. 26.

Bernstein, p.274.

Using Levinas's definitions.

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